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WIDE AWAKE

A COMPLETE STORY **WEEKLY.** EVERY WEEK.

IN FOOL'S PARADISE;
OR, THE BOY WHO HAD THINGS EASY. *By FRED WARBURTON.*



"Let him take anything he wants!" screamed shuddering Den. "He can take me first!" grated Ben, shoving up the masked man's arm. Bang! The pistol was but the starter's shot for one of the toughest fights that ever a boy put up!

WIDE AWAKE WEEKLY

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IN FOOL'S PARADISE

OR,

THE BOY WHO HAD THINGS EASY

BY FRED WARBURTON

CHAPTER I.

THE FUNNY SIDE OF LIFE.

"Eh?" wondered Ben Freeman, rising on one elbow and peering down the slope through the bushes.

It was one of those glorious, golden afternoons of early October, and Ben, after a hard day's tramp, had lain down for a nap from which he had been suddenly awakened.

The scene that he saw below was one that made him flush hot with wrath for just an instant.

Then the funny side of it all dawned on him.

"The little, white-livered ducklet!" he uttered.

Then again Ben started to grin. That grin lasted for some moments.

It was up in the mountains, in one of the most fashionable parts of the Berkshires, that what our hero saw was taking place.

In a pretty little glade, not more than a hundred yards from where Ben Freeman lay, a tramp had stopped a fashionably-dressed youth.

In point of fact, it was a genuine "hold-up"—with a funny side to it.

The youth, alone, had come strolling along to where a tramp sat smoking out the butt of a cigar.

The youth was of fairly good build physically.

But the tramp was of splendid build, though of no larger body.

Yet that tramp looked like a fellow who could—and would—hold his own anywhere that fisticuffs came in.

"I guess I've been waiting for ye," announced the tramp, rising quickly before the approaching youth.

"For me?" echoed that youth, in astonishment.

His face went quickly pale; he shook slightly, strive as he would to conceal his cowardice.

"Yep; waiting for you," the tramp went on, coolly. "Ye see, boss, my clothes are getting a bit to the sad. I've had it in mind—writ it down on a piece of paper, in fact, to get myself a new suit."

"Really, my good fellow," replied the youth, shakily, "you make a mistake if you assume that I am carrying funds with me. I shall not be able to contribute to-day."

"Oh, the cash ain't necessary—not a bit," retorted the tramp, impudently. "See here, boss—ever see a knife-play?"

"No," admitted the youth, fidgeting and looking as if he were wondering whether he could get away by taking to his heels.

"I made one—once," grinned the tramp. "Wait; I'll explain the principle of the thing to ye."

"I'm very sure I—I don't want to see the thing!" protested the youth.

"Oh, yes, you do! It's interesting," grinned the tramp, reaching into the inside pocket of the ragged vest that he wore. "It's worth remembering, too."

He took out a tattered black sheath, from which protruded the handle of a dagger.

Out came that knife, the blade being long, slim and looking villainously sharp.

The youth shuddered.

"Ever see how quick a knife sticks in through a skin?" queried the tramp, looking meaningly into the youth's face.

But that youth, without audible reply, had turned to bolt.

"Wait!" roared the tramp. "Or you'll know!"

"What do you want? What do you mean?" gasped the youth, pausing irresolutely in his tracks.

"You heard me say I needed a new suit of clothes?" demanded the tramp, harshly.

"Y-y-yes, of course. I'm dreadfully sorry that I can't help you out."

"You can!"

"Eh, my good fellow?"

"You're just about my build," pursued the tramp.

"That's so," cried the youth, brightening. "Come down to the hotel and ask for me. I'll see that you have a couple of my suits. A good idea—great!"

"It would be if I'd been born yesterday," retorted the tramp, with sarcasm.

"Dear me! What do you mean?"

"I come down to the hotel—and what happens to me?" demanded the knight of the road. "I don't think! Not any! You'll have to do better than that. See here, boss, that suit you've got on just takes my eye. In fact, that was what I was thinking when ye first came along. So—"

"Eh?"

"Peel!"

"My good fellow!"

"Strip!"

"Pre—preposterous!"

"Nothing of the sort. Shed yer bark!"

"But, my—my good fellow—" trembled the dazed youth.

"See here, we've fooled long enough, boss," interrupted the tramp in a tone that was both business-like and warningly savage. "I want them clothes, that hat and them shoes. So get 'em off—and do it quick!—without no holler. If ye don't, ye'll know all about that knife-play trick I was telling ye about!"

"But, bless me, if I take off my clothes, what shall I wear back to the hotel, if you please?" gasped the astonished one.

"Wear mine, if ye like," proposed the tramp, agreeably. "I'm going to leave 'em behind."

"But—"

"Now, see here, boss," blazed Mr. Tramp. "Ye've got too much chin! Let me hear another yip out of ye and I'll jab this knife in yer skin—s'help me!"

There seemed to be no manner of use in arguing with such a man.

With a groaning gasp the youth drew off his coat, folded it, and laid it on the ground.

His vest followed, and by this time his cheeks were as white as the clean shirt that he uncovered.

"Now, the breeches!" commanded the tramp, who had thrown his own ragged coat and vest on the ground. "And I'll trouble ye for yer galluses, too!"

Thoroughly subdued, the youth drew off his trousers.

"Might as well give me that nice clean shirt," commented the tramp. "And, of course, shoes and hat."

Falteringly, the youth obeyed, standing exposed in his underwear.

"My! What nice underwear that is!" mocked the tramp. "Silk, ain't it?"

"Ye-es."

"Peel the silk, too."

"Oh, I say!"

"If ye do, ye'll get hurt—so don't! Peel every stitch ye've got on. Don't be bashful. My duds'll cover ye until ye get to the hotel. Won't it be a treat for yer friends to see ye rigged up in my kinder style?"

At that kind of a picture, the youth began to cry.

Yes, he cried. Great tears rolled down his peachy cheeks, and sobs choked his voice.

"Too bad, I know," mimicked the tramp. "But it has to be done. And step over there by that sumac bush. I'm going to move to where your clothes are."

As the youth, now in underwear and shoes, shifted his position, and the tramp took up his post by the brand-new clothes, the latter dropped his ugly-looking knife on the ground.

"I can pick that blade up again, if I want it, ye know," he observed with a cheerful grin.

"Oh, b-b-but you won't need it," the youth made haste to assure him. "B-b-but see here, can't we compromise?"

"Can't we—what?"

"Can't you let me out of shedding my underclothes?" asked the youth, anxiously. "Really, I don't want to put your clothes on next to my skin."

"Oh, ye'll soon get used to the feel," laughed the tramp, who had seated himself and was taking off his own shoes and soiled socks.

"But—"

"If ye make another single kick," roared the tramp, "the knife goes inter yer! Hustle off them socks and pretty shoes and toss 'em over—on the jump, ye understand!"

Still crying, the youth seated himself on the ground and began to unlace a shoe.

"This thing has gone far enough!" uttered Ben Freeman, looking around him for a couple of stones, each half the size of his fist. "The dude is a booby, but he has a right at least to be on earth!"

Having made up his mind, Ben rose and stepped quickly through the bushes, running nimbly down the slope.

Mr. Trafmp stared in amazement. The dudish youth glanced quickly up with a burst of hope in his eyes.

"This thing has gone far enough," declared Ben, in his brisk, business-like tone.

"Eh? What are ye butting in for?" roared the tramp, leaping erect on his bare feet.

"It seemed just the right time to butt in," Ben declared coolly, and without a trace of anger in his tone.

He had halted about half-way between youth and tramp.

"It's none of yer affair," muttered the tramp, his eyes talking fight. "I need them clothes—and I'm going to have 'em! D'ye happen to notice the knife at my feet?"

"Yes," Ben admitted, "and you're not going to reach for it, either!"

"Why not?" blustered the tramp.

"Because if you do," asserted Freeman, posing a stone in his right hand with the pose of a pitcher, "I'm going to let this young rock drive straight for your head. I'll land right, too, for I've always been called a pretty fair pitcher."

The tramp looked as if he were wondering whether this slight but resolute-looking youngster of seventeen would make good at a pinch.

"Step away from those clothes—and leave your knife there!" ordered our hero, in a business-like tone.

"That'll be about all," sneered the tramp. "I call ye! Twenty-three—unless ye want to see if I've got the goods."

"I'll give you just about five seconds to get away from clothes and knife!" announced Ben, undauntedly. "If you don't do it, and get good and away at that, I'll lay your head open with two well-pitched young rocks. I shan't warn you again. I'm counting now—five, remember! One, two, three, f—"

But the tramp had looked into those resolute young eyes and had quailed.

He saw unfailing trouble written not only in Ben's face, but expressed by the boy's whole attitude.

"I give in," growled the tramp, in a surly voice. "Ye're two to one, and the odds are too heavy!"

"Yes," Ben admitted, drily, "they are."

The sobbing youth had dried his tears, but he did not yet venture to speak.

He could not be wholly sure, as yet, that Ben Freeman was not a higher type of hold-up man.

"My friend," advised Ben, turning to the timorous youth, "come over here and get your clothes on. Don't be afraid. See, I've got that knife that you didn't like the looks of."

And Ben stepped forward, bent over, and picked up the knife.

Yet the whole thing was done so quickly that the tramp did not have time to make a spring at the new actor on the scene.

"Just get your things on," said Ben, coolly. "After you've replaced your wardrobe we can saunter away and leave this gentleman of the road to resume his own clothing in peace."

The youth dressed quickly, in nervous haste.

Mr. Tramp looked on glumly, especially when his eyes

again caught sight of that handsome gold watch and chain that he had counted upon as being his.

"Good!" smiled Ben, when he saw the timid youth again stand forth, completely arrayed. "Now, we might as well walk away from here and leave our friend to get back into the clothes he's used to."

"But I'm going to help him out a bit, anyway, poor wretch!" uttered the timid one.

Drawing a dainty purse from one of his pockets, the youth drew a five-dollar bill from a goodly roll and dropped it to the ground.

Then, without a word, he turned to waiting Ben, and walked away with him.

And Ben's heart, by that simple act, had been warmed into something like respect for the timid youth.

"He may be a mutt when it comes to a scrap," thought Ben, slangily, "but what he just did shows that he has a heart somewhere near the right place."

"Thanks for the fiver!" shouted the tramp tardily after them.

But the youth who had bestowed it never answered. He walked tremblingly along with our hero.

"My name's Ben Freeman," our hero announced, after they had gone a quarter of a mile down the mountain slope from the scene of the late encounter.

"Good name," observed the other, approvingly. "Do you suppose we're safe from that rough fellow now?"

"We've been safe all the time," Ben smiled. "And, see, I've taken the trouble to bring his knife along. That's just the same thing as drawing the fellow's teeth."

"Then suppose we sit down," proposed the youth. "Really, I want to get my nerves steadied before I go down to the hotel, and there it is just below"—pointing less than a quarter of a mile down the slope at a big and handsome summer hotel.

"That splendid place?" demanded Ben.

"Yes; that's the Somerset. A very fine place, too."

"I know," nodded Ben. "I worked in a place like that all summer."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; I waited in a hotel over in the White Mountains."

"Ah! A servant?" asked the youth, shifting a bit away from Ben on the rock on which they were sitting.

"A servant," repeated Ben, a trifle crossly. "Forget that. No, sirree—not a servant. I worked as a waiter along with college boys who were paying their way through Yale and Harvard. Lots of likely young fellows do that. The tips are pretty good, you know. And the job has given me a good start for the fall. I've left my mother fairly well fixed for a while, and now I'm on the search after something good in business."

"Dear me, I hope you'll find it."

"What's your name?" asked Ben, directly.

"Denby Brooks."

"Belong to anyone?"

"Eh, my good fellow?"

"Drop that 'good fellow' part of it!" ordered Ben,

briskly. "Don't try to lord it over me. I punched the faces of three fellows who tried to do that this summer. What I asked you was, have you got any folks?"

"My parents are dead, but I have a guardian."

"I hope he's a good one!" said Ben, grimly. "Tell me something about yourself, Brooks."

Denby Brooks stared for a moment at this familiar form of address.

Then he went on, rather humbly:

"I'm rather alone in the world, Freeman. I have no near relatives, and my guardian is abroad most of the time."

"He seems to send you your cash regularly," smiled Ben, eyeing not without some envy the fine clothes and evident signs of prosperity in the booby.

"Oh, he doesn't have to send me anything," Denby explained, hastily. "He turned over my money to me. I've got it all!"

"And you're not of age yet?"

"I will be in about six months."

"Your guardian must be a bit dippy," Ben observed.

"Eh? Why do you say that, my good—friend?"

"That's better," Ben noted. "I suppose I have seemed like a friend this afternoon—and truly you seem to need a friend. But I said your guardian was foolish to turn your money all over to you. You can make him pay it all over again when you're twenty-one—that is, if you could be crooked enough. Doesn't your guardian know that he could be made to pay you your money again?"

"I think he knows it very well," answered Den, laughing for the first time.

"Then he has a lot of confidence in your honesty?" Ben inquired.

"Perhaps. But you see, Freeman, my fortune amounts to only about a half a million—"

"Only a half a million?" ejaculated Ben, half-aloud. "Lord, what hard luck!"

"And you see," Den explained, candidly enough now, "my guardian, Mr. Arthur Grant, is worth several millions—most of which I'll probably inherit one of these days."

"You will?" demanded Ben, eyeing his companion with interest. "Say, you ain't worrying any about a job, are you?"

"No. And so you see, Freeman, if I didn't act square when I reached twenty-one, I'd lose a good deal more than I could gain through being crooked with such a splendid old chap as Mr. Grant."

"Say," uttered Ben, with lively enthusiasm, "what a fine, bang-up time you could have in life, if—"

He paused, growing slightly red in the face.

"If what—?" demanded Brooks.

"I don't believe I'd better say it," Ben returned, soberly.

"Now, you've got my curiosity aroused," cried Brooks, eagerly. "Tell me what you were going to say, please."

"And you won't get mad if I do?"

"No, indeed."

"On your honor?" persisted our hero, gravely.

"On my honor, then, if you put it that way."

"Then I'll say the whole thing," Ben declared, promptly, and with a force that made Den Brooks glance at his new companion with undisguised admiration. "Brooks, I've been noting things about you for the past little while. You've got some good qualities. Oh, don't deny it," went on Freeman, smilingly, as the other gave a half-indignant start. "But you lack one great thing."

"What is it, Freeman?"

"Manhood! Grit, get-up, snap, vim!"

"Dear me! That's five, isn't it?"

"No; all one," our hero rejoined. "All come under the head of manhood. That's just what you lack. And it's too bad, too, for I really believe you could brace up and be a man."

"Do you?" asked Den, soberly, and reddening under this altogether too-friendly criticism.

"Yes, I do," Ben pursued, earnestly. "Are you interested in the idea?"

"Yes, I am," Den Brooks admitted, seriously. "But how shall I go about it?"

"You need an instructor."

"I've had all sorts of tutors."

"Yes, but I mean a real teacher. One who can show you just how to be a man. And, see here, I'm out on the hunt for a job. Suppose you try me as a teacher in grit and manhood?"

Ben almost gasped himself as he put this rather cheeky and daring proposition.

But Den Brooks, the booby with a generous streak, took him seriously.

"What would your terms be, Freeman?"

"Why," rattled on Ben, making it up as he went along, and almost holding his breath at his own impudence and greed, "first of all, all my expenses for living and for traveling with you when you go traveling. Then, for salary, twenty dollars a week. Finally, you're to pay the bills for keeping me just as well-clothed as you are yourself, for I've got to be your friend, not your servant. If you want to make these terms with me, Brooks, you can have a try at it, and I'm to take a month's notice to quit when you get through with me."

Ben came to a full stop, now, and all out of breath.

He expected a prompt and sarcastic answer.

But Brooks remained silent for some moments, reflecting that he owed Ben a debt of gratitude and this would be a good way to pay it.

"Do you think you could succeed?" asked Den, at last, in a low voice.

"I'd hope to."

"Can you make me as—as—well, as cheeky, dashing, hustling and brave as you are?"

"I'll do my best," Ben promised, earnestly.

"Then, Freeman, since you'll take a month's notice, the

risk on my part isn't very great. I'll go you. Consider yourself engaged."

"Eh?" gasped Ben, jumping to his feet and holding out his hand. "Shake! Now, you'll soon begin to find life interesting!"

A promise that was more certain to be fulfilled than either had any idea of at that moment!

CHAPTER II.

BEN CHASES AWAY THE 'SKEETERS.

"Now, I guess you're beginning to know almost as much about me as I do about myself," announced Den Brooks.

That young man had entered upon the new arrangement very completely.

First of all, he had taken Ben down to the Somerset Hotel and had registered him there.

Ben, in fact, had the room next to his new friend on the first floor up. A connecting bath-room joined the two rooms.

And, though Brooks was something like three years older than our hero, and by no means badly built, yet it was found that one of his choice suits splendidly fitted Ben.

Ben was attired in that suit now, pending a visit to Den's tailor on the morrow.

They were seated in Den's cosey room.

It was the room of a lover of athletics—a lover of Yale at that.

Golf-traps and Yale banners, baseball masks and bats, riding boots and sporting magazines were littered there.

"I feel a good deal of a Yale man," Den announced, simply. "I always wanted to go to Yale. I've tried twice, in fact, but failed in the exams both times. Still, I feel that I'm a thorough Yale man in spirit."

Ben had to turn to hide his smile at this simple statement.

"Now, we've had a long talk," said Ben. "Do you want to know what I think?"

"Well? What?"

"I think you've got too much money."

"It never struck me that way," smiled Den, weakly.

"Well, it strikes me that way, for I've been doing a whole lot of thinking while you've been telling me about yourself. You've got so much money that the flies are lighting around you. They're sucking greedily at all the sugar in sight. They're going to get all your cash away from you by the time you're twenty-one."

"I don't see how you can say that!"

"Well, there's that German——"

"Herr Knapp?"

"Yes; the fellow who has invented the wonderful new explosive that some government is going to buy the secret of for millions."

"You don't doubt that Herr Knapp's invention is a great one, do you?" asked Den, opening his eyes.

"I don't know anything about his explosive. But I'll bet you don't get anything out of it," Ben declared.

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, why do you suppose he comes to you for capital. If this German has such a wonderfully good thing, why doesn't he go to some big banker for the capital? Why does he come to you for the money—you, who know nothing about finance?"

"Why! Herr Knapp has congratulated me on my great knowledge of business!" cried Dan.

"Of course he has," jeered Ben. "That's because he wants to play you for an easy mark and get a lot of money out of you. How much does he expect you to put up?"

"Er—about fifty thousand dollars."

"And you've got the cash handy?"

"I can get it from my bankers."

"How much have you let Knapp have so far?"

"Only about a thousand."

Ben groaned.

There came a tap at the door and a bell-boy handed in a card.

"This is Herr Knapp, now," cried Den.

"Let him come up, by all means," begged Ben Freeman. "See here," he went on, "will you let me handle this matter for you a little while? Keep kinder quiet and go by my advice? I won't queer anything unless I see that this fellow Knapp is a crook or a crazy man. Will you trust my judgment?"

"Ye-es, I suppose so," assented Den, doubtfully.

"You'll let me manage a bit?"

"Yes, if you want to."

"I do, Den, if it's necessary. And you won't throw me down if I take hold?"

"Of course I won't," protested Den, earnestly. "See here, Ben, I've grown to take a good deal of stock in you the last few hours."

There was no chance to say more, for there came another and heavier knock at the door, and Herr Knapp entered.

He was a slimly-built man of forty, tall but round-shouldered, and with dark hair that grew long down over his neck and forehead.

Herr Knapp's long, black coat was glossy at the seams and badly brushed.

"Slouch," in fact, was a word that went far in describing the German's personal appearance.

But he had deeply-sunk, dark eyes that had a strange flash in them.

"Is it the light of great purpose, or the gleam of insanity?" our hero wondered.

Den introduced the two, and Herr Knapp looked disappointed.

"I had hoped to find you alone, my young friend," said Herr Knapp, in a tone of disappointment. He sent a meaning look in Ben's direction.

"We've just been talking about your invention, Herr Knapp," Ben broke in, cheerfully.

"Ah, yes, yes," agreed the German. "Mr. Brooks, may

I ask you to name a later hour at which you will be at liberty?"

"Why, we've got about as much time to spare just now, before dinner, as we're likely to have any time this evening," Ben supplied, cheerfully.

"Ach!" exploded the German, impatiently, turning and trying to stab Ben with a look. "May I venture to observe, Mr. Freeman, that my visit concerns only Mr. Brooks?"

"It's a mistake, but a natural one," retorted Ben, indulgently. "The truth is, Herr Knapp, that Mr. Brooks has asked me to interest myself in the matter."

"Ah!" exclaimed Herr Knapp, his eyes lighting up, as he looked more amiable at our hero. "You also have money, and you wish to invest?"

"No."

"I do not understand. What, then?"

"Why, Herr Knapp, Mr. Brooks has, to a considerable extent, placed the matter of his investing in my hands. He is going to be guided a good deal by my advice."

"I cannot believe that!" cried the German, quickly.

"Sorry," Ben returned, coolly. "Mr. Brooks, however, backs up my statement. Don't you, Den?"

"Yes," replied Den, promptly.

Herr Knapp drew himself up stiffly.

"I never deal, except mit principals," he returned, grandly.

"You'll have to deal with me somewhat in this matter," Ben went on, confidently. "Mr. Brooks has told you that. If you don't like to deal with me, why, of course, there's such a thing as our compelling you to."

Herr Knapp, as he regarded the Freeman boy keenly, seemed to be choking over something that had gotten in his throat.

"What do you want? What do you ask?" he demanded.

"Sit down, won't you, Herr Knapp?"

The German glowered a bit, but he sulkily accepted the chair that was pointed out to him.

"Now, then," Ben went on, pleasantly, "Mr. Brooks has been telling me about this business. It has struck me as strange that there are not papers in the case."

"Papers?" asked the German.

"Exactly," Ben nodded, crisply. "You claim to have an invention. You want Mr. Brooks to put up fifty thousand dollars. Now, what we want you to do is to draw up a set of papers setting forth your whole scheme. Address this paper to Mr. Brooks, setting forth just what you hope to do with the explosive that you have invented. Show just where you hope to sell it, give some idea of what you expect to make out of the deal, and state exactly just how much money Mr. Brooks is to put up as the capitalist. Tell just what that money is to be spent for. And agree in your paper that Mr. Brooks shall appoint a business representative who shall have power to see that the money is spent just as outlined. In other words, we want every possible business particular stated in that paper,"

and we want to see what guarantee you are able to give as to the proper handling of the money."

"But all that is not necessary," exclaimed the German, who had followed our hero's words with a steadily darkening face.

"It is necessary," Ben contradicted, though his face still wore that pleasant smile. "Make the paper as exact as you can, Herr Knapp, for we shall consider it carefully. If that paper does not make a good impression Mr. Brooks will not invest. So spend a lot of careful thought on your paper, Herr Knapp!"

"But this is outrageous!" cried the German, rising in wrath. "And it throws doubt on my word."

"Please don't look at it that way," Ben threw back, as he, too, rose. "We want to believe in your honesty and your clear-headedness of purpose, Herr Knapp. We shall naturally believe much more in your honesty of purpose when we find you willing to meet us half-way with a paper that sets forth your big scheme clearly."

"I do not know that I shall be able to let you in on my great invention, Herr Brooks," scowled the German, turning his cunning eyes toward Brooks.

Den gasped slightly, but Ben broke in, cheerily:

"Don't be afraid of us, Herr Knapp. Turn in your whole plan to us, and be sure that all will go well, if you have what you think you have."

"And these are your words, Herr Brooks?" demanded the German, again fixing a piercing gaze on the rich youngster.

"Ye-es," Den assented.

"Ach! Well, we shall see," said the German, swiftly. "Good night!"

He was gone like a flash.

But out in the hallway beyond he turned, for an instant, flashing a scowling look at the door which he had just closed.

"Freeman, your name is, eh, my baby? Perhaps you think I am a fraud? That I do not know anything about high explosives? But, bah! if you get between me and my sugar-barrel, young booby of a Freeman, you shall find that I can place a bomb under you that will carry you two feet into the air! Ach!"

As Herr Knapp went down the corridor he was sawing air with his arms, his eyes gleaming desperately.

"Was that just right?" asked Den, in a low voice, when the German had gone.

"Why not?" clicked Ben. "He doesn't expect you to put fifty thousand dollars into anything that he can't put up a good business-like paper for, does he? Den, Den, my boy, I'm afraid you need somebody to chase away the 'skeeters'!"

"'Skeeters?'" queried Den Brooks.

"Yes; the insects that perhaps have gathered to suck your life's blood out of you."

"Blood?"

"Well, your money, then. Den, I'm afraid a good many

people have set their minds on getting you parted from your big lot of money!"

"Then I'll have to get married, eh?—and have a wife to look after my money for me?" laughed Den, nervously.

He had been telling our hero about the dashingly pretty young lady now stopping in the hotel, whom he hoped to make his wife.

"Jessica Holland?" murmured Ben, under his breath, as he watched the face of his new friend. "She's a mighty pretty girl. Den pointed her out to me in the dining-room. But are those eyes true? Or is Jessica Holland only another 'skeeter? Is she, too, scheming to get Dan's money? I'll take time to notice things about her!"

Ben watched Jessica Holland again when he and Dan went down to dinner in the great dining-room.

Jessica was tall, dark, queenly in her bearing. Her rich olive face was distinctly beautiful. It did not seem at all difficult to fall in love with so much beauty.

Den trembled slightly as Jessica swept by them to her own table.

Jessica raised her eye-brows slightly as she glanced at Ben Freeman.

"Does she scent any trouble in me?" wondered Ben, as he caught the swift, half-contemptuous look that Jessica sent him. "Or does she simply feel that I'm hardly worth notice?"

He could not make up his mind. And, since he had taken his position with Den Brooks in all seriousness and meant to perform his task with the utmost honesty, Ben did not want to judge too hastily about the girl whom Den had selected for a sweetheart.

Suddenly Den's jaw dropped a bit.

"What's the matter?" whispered Ben.

"Don't look just now, but there's a fellow who has just seated himself at Jessica's table," faltered Den, miserably. "He's a fellow I don't like, for he's after Jessica, too. Confound it, she's smiling at Ferd Laylor, and never looking this way!"

Ben got his look in good time. He had a good glimpse of the rival, Ferd Laylor, a tall, rather handsome-looking young fellow of twenty-four or five.

"Oh, you mustn't mind a rival or two," smiled Ben. "That will make the chase better worth while."

"I'd rather have anyone else than Ferd Laylor around Jessica," muttered Den, whose appetite was gone.

A middle-aged woman soon joined Jessica and Laylor at the table. Den explained that the woman was Mrs. Thurman, Jessica's aunt.

After the coming of Laylor, Den just dawdled over his dinner, not caring whether he had any or not.

But Ben's healthy appetite took care of enough food for two.

Den waited until Jessica's party were leaving the table. Then he, too, rose, followed by Ben.

Den contrived to meet the three in the hotel lobby, just outside of the dining-room.

Den was slightly ahead, in fact, waiting for his rival and sweetheart to pass.

And Ben, having fallen slightly behind, unnoticed, and having sharp ears, overheard Jessica murmuring to Laylor:

"Then, since you insist, at the angle of the north porch in just twenty minutes."

"I shall be there in twenty minutes by the watch!" murmured Laylor, eagerly.

Then Den met them, interposing an eager but unnecessary greeting to Jessica.

"I—I was going to ask you for a little stroll this evening," proposed Den.

"Too bad. I had intended staying in my room," replied Jessica.

"Oh, but really—" faltered Den, growing pale.

"I will be here at nine, in the lobby," murmured Jessica, Laylor having passed on after a stiff nod to Den.

Young Brooks then presented Ben as his friend.

Though our hero was pleasant enough, Jessica gave him hardly more than a cool little nod and an equally cool word or two.

"Isn't she a glorious girl?" whispered Den, eagerly, when Jessica and her aunt had passed on.

"She certainly is," agreed Ben, promptly. "And now, Den, old fellow, I want you to come outside with me for a few minutes."

"Yours to command until nine o'clock," agreed Den Brooks. "You heard my appointment with Jessica for that hour, didn't you?"

"Yes," nodded Ben, thoughtfully, as he hurried Den out of the hotel.

"I wonder if this is a square thing for me to do?" wondered our hero, as he led Den along the great porch, now deserted as the cool October evening came on. "Yes, it must be square, for it'll show Den whether his girl is using him on the square. If she is, I'll owe her an apology. If she isn't, the trick isn't too mean for finding out."

"This is what they call the angle of the north porch, isn't it?" Ben asked, as they halted.

"Yes. Why?" Den queried.

"Jump over the rail and down to the ground with me," Ben requested.

"Why?"

"Now, Den, quit that, won't you? You agreed to let me manage some things, you know. So, over with you."

The pair of youngsters went lightly down to the ground, which was some six feet lower than the level of the porch.

Seated on the ground, with their backs to the wood-work, they were well out of the sight of passers on the porch.

Den sat there in wondering silence for some minutes before they heard light footsteps on the flooring overhead.

Then, next, all in a twinkling, the two eavesdroppers heard Mrs. Thurman's voice say, anxiously:

"Jessica, my dear, I'm afraid you'll have trouble with

young Mr. Brooks through these sly meetings with Mr. Laylor."

Den was trembling, a cold ooze on his forehead. He looked as if about to speak, about to jump up.

But Ben Freeman laid a tight grip on his arm.

"Trouble with Den Brooks?" demanded Jessica's low, scornful voice. "Pooh! He's only a fool, a booby! I've trained Den right. He's afraid of me. I'd like to see him daring to be impertinent with me."

"But, Jessica, you wouldn't drive him away from you?" remonstrated Mrs. Thurman.

"Den Brooks couldn't be driven away," retorted Jessica, amusedly. "He's nothing but a fool. He's a slave—my slave."

"But you intend to marry him, Jessica?" persisted her aunt.

"After he has asked me a few times," replied the girl, sneeringly. "It would never do to say 'yes' the first time he asked me. But, in the end, I'll hook the silly little booby."

"He is a rich young man, but he has millions more coming one of these days. A great catch, Jessica!"

"Oh, I know that," replied the girl, loftily. "And those millions are what I am after. They'll be mine, not Den Brooks's. And once I get them securely in my hands, Den Brooks may go skating, if he likes. I wonder how the little booby ever imagines that a girl with spirit could remain tied to such a nothingness as he is!"

There was a sharp sound, as Jessica turned to walk on with her aunt.

And Den, with a very white face and staring eyes, rose and hurried crouchingly along the ground to the main entrance to the Somerset.

"You heard that, Ben?" he cried, hoarsely, as he stared into our hero's eyes. "Not me, but my money! Jessica despises me!"

"Don't take it too much to heart, old chap," urged Ben Freeman. "Only another mosquito brushed away, you know."

"Hang Ferd Laylor!" ground out wretched Den, as he saw that tall, good-looking young man come out and go down the porch to his meeting with Miss Holland. "He can have Jessica now! I've at least got vanity, Ben Freeman, if no real pride. I'm through with my longing for Jessica."

Ben smiled as he realized how easily he had swatted one "skeeter."

CHAPTER III.

THE EVENING KEEPS ON BEING LIVELY.

"Oh, what a fool I've been!" groaned Den, wretchedly, as he gained the privacy of his room.

"Never too late to learn, Den, old fellow!" cheerily cried his new adviser. "And now I'll tell you the truth, Brooks. I heard Jessica make the appointment for that porch meeting with Laylor when they were coming from the dining-room."

"She wanted me only to get hold of my money!" cried Den, savagely. "Oh, what a fool I've been over her. And what a lot bigger fool I came near making of myself. I might as well show you, Ben Freeman!"

Trying desperately to smile, pallid-faced Den led the way to a cupboard where one of his trunks lay.

Unlocking this, he took out a leather case.

Drawing a tiny key from a vest pocket, Den laid the case on the bureau and unlocked it.

"Look in here, Ben Freeman, and see what you shall find!" cried Den, and threw the cover up.

Our hero gasped. He was staring at a small but perfect, beautiful diamond necklace.

"You bought that for Jessica?" he demanded, looking at young Brooks.

"She'd have had it, in another hour, if it hadn't been for you—and her!" whispered Den.

"You foolish fellow. Throwing away all that money—"

"Eight thousand dollars," supplied Den.

"On a girl you really didn't know anything about!"

"I shall be more careful another time. What a chump I was. I wanted to see her to-night and beg her to accept that as the first betrothal gift. Oh, Ben, it seems too bad—too bad!—to find such a beautiful girl out as I did."

"You'll sell this necklace to-morrow," spoke Ben, cheerily. "And, in the meantime, we'll take this down to the hotel safe and have it locked up. You're crazy, Den, to keep such valuables in your room. Come, let me do that up in paper, and we'll go to the hotel office with it at once."

It was best to have the jar over with as quickly as possible, Ben reasoned, so he got his friend down into the hotel office at once.

But Ben did the talking with the clerk, and attended to getting the receipt, for Den was still too much upset to think of business.

While Ben was standing at the desk, and Den a few feet away from him, Ferd Laylor, his brow as black as thunder-clouds, stepped into the office.

Plainly Jessica must have dismissed him early.

Espying wretched Den, Laylor came swiftly over to him.

"Just a word for you, Brooks!" muttered the "rival" in a sharp, low tone. "Don't persist in your attentions to a certain young lady, unless you're prepared to fight for her—and fight to the death! Do you understand? I think you do!"

Laylor had turned on his heel again and walked toward the porch before the astonished Brooks came to himself.

"Did you hear that?" he murmured, as Ben came back with the receipt.

"Yes," nodded our hero. "You're in no danger of death."

"But what should I have said to him?"

"You might have told him," hinted Ben, "that the field is clear—that you lay no claim to any young lady."

"By jove! I wish I had!" cried Den, bitterly. "Shall I hunt him up and say that to him now?"

"Better not," replied Ben, after looking critically at his new friend, who was trembling with excitement. "It had better be said by somebody who is cool. Shall I take the word to him?"

"Will you?" cried Den, eagerly.

"At once!"

Ben stepped through the entrance at once on to the broad porch.

There were at least a dozen men out here enjoying their cigars.

Standing by himself, a little way off, his brow still black, was Laylor.

Ben went up to him promptly.

"Mr. Laylor," he began, pleasantly, "I've a message for you."

"Yes?" asked that young man, coldly. "Deliver it, then."

"I have merely come to tell you, Mr. Laylor, that Mr. Brooks wishes me to assure you that he does not care to be regarded as a rival of yours in any quarter. That may seem a strange message, but you will admit that your language a minute ago warrants such a reply. Mr. Brooks is not and will not be your rival in any quarter. That is all."

"And does Brooks send such messages as that by his valet?" sneered Laylor, savagely.

"What's that?" Ben cried, sharply.

"Well, you're Den Brooks's valet, his body-servant, aren't you?" jeered Laylor.

Smash! It landed plumply on the tip of Ferd Laylor's nose, sending him to the floor in a heap.

"Be careful how you insult your betters, fellow!" warned Ben, coldly.

"What's this?" cried one of the half-dozen men who ran up quickly at the sound of the fall.

"This valet of Brooks's assaulted me!" raged Laylor, jumping to his feet in a quivering white rage.

He made a dive at our hero, who stood coolly awaiting the collision.

Two men pounced upon Laylor, at the same time holding him firmly.

"Let me go!" quivered the fellow.

"Not until you cool down," retorted one of his holders.

Laylor struggled like a madman, but his holders were big fellows, and equal to their job.

Hearing the noise, fully two-score of men and boys had now poured out of the hotel.

In the background hovered a few women, Jessica and her aunt among them.

Den, shaking and white-faced, hurried forward, then stopped.

But Laylor caught sight of him.

"This is Brooks's doing!" roared the angry one. "He put his valet up to assaulting me."

"That's a lie," spoke Ben, promptly. "Laylor, you're

in a heat now, but if you repeat that word 'valet' again, I warn you that I shall thump you at the first chance—and thump you good!"

"Who called you my valet?" asked Den Brooks, stepping forward. "It's a lie, whoever said it. You're my friend, not a servant."

Den was growing slightly in valor. That forenoon he wouldn't have dared to pass the lie to any able-bodied man.

"Mr. Laylor, cool down," urged the manager of the hotel, stepping forward. "There are ladies present."

"Then let them withdraw," blurted Laylor. "I've got to have it out with this val—"

"Careful!" warned Ben, coolly, but there was a dangerous flash in his eyes.

"Mr. Laylor," continued the manager, who began to see how things lay, "Mr. Freeman is not a servant. He is registered here as a guest of the house, and is on a footing with yourself. If you have insulted Mr. Freeman, I have a right to expect that you apologize to him."

"Apologize?" grunted Laylor. "I'll thump him instead."

The manager was a firm man, bent on running his house in the way that he believed to be right.

"If there is any further trouble, Mr. Laylor," he said, crisply, "I shall be obliged to ask you to leave this hotel."

With that the manager turned upon his heel.

"Be sensible, Laylor," whispered one of his friends in the angered man's ear. "That fellow, Freeman, is making a much better impression than you are."

Which was proved by the fact that a sensible-looking middle-aged man, resting an arm over Ben's shoulder, murmured:

"The best course, Freeman, is to withdraw until that chap has a chance to cool. We don't want any trouble here."

As the peacemaker led Ben away most of the other men followed.

They strolled over to the north porch, where they took seats, and Ben soon became a center of the talk.

Den had followed. He sat in the little reflected glory of his new friend.

Then a bell-boy approached, murmuring to Den:

"Miss Holland wishes to remind you, sir, of an appointment."

Den whitened, stiffened, then looked limp.

Ben had heard the message, but no one else had.

"Well," he whispered, smilingly, under cover of the other voices, "what answer are you going to send?"

"Ha-hadn't I better take the message?" queried Den.

"If you do, when you see her, you'll wind around a pretty woman's finger again, and be a fool slave again."

"You think I'm weak enough for that?" demanded Den, offendedly.

"Yes," said Ben, plumply. "If you go to her now, you're the goat—a hopeless goat. You won't need me any longer, because I can't do you any good."

Den wavered, miserably.

"What word shall I send?"

"Simply say that you regret greatly that another engagement has come up. Beg her to excuse you."

Den turned, repeating, parrot-fashion, to the bell-boy, who glided away.

"Come up to the rooms," proposed Ben, a few minutes later. "You've had an exciting day, and you'll want to go to bed early."

Den followed without protest.

Both youngsters would have been interested had they been able to look into the apartments occupied by Jessica and her aunt.

"I can't understand it," flared Jessica. "I never got anything like an insulting message from the booby before. And I know he meant to speak to me to-night—to propose. There was the necklace he ordered at the jeweler's. I heard about that, and I'm sure that he didn't order it for any other woman. Aunt, what does it mean?"

"It means, perhaps," hinted Mrs. Thurman, "that the booby is not quite as much your slave as you thought. You must play carefully, Jessica. Remember that our money is running low. You came here for a desperate play, to win Den Brooks and his fortune, and the greater fortune that he'll have some near day. Don't do anything careless and lose your golden chance!"

"I won't!" cried Jessica, dangerously. "I'm beautiful, and I'll snare that booby soon and hard. Aunt, I begin to understand. It was that new fellow, Freeman, who has caused this trouble. He's the enemy. Didn't he pick a fight with Ferd Laylor to-night? What about? This affair, you may be very sure! Oh, we shall win, now, aunt—for I've discovered the real enemy—the real danger! It's Freeman! Heaven help him, now, for I'll crush him. I know men well enough to know how to ruin that fellow Freeman!"

Den had undressed and gotten into bed. Ben, stripped, and then in the handsome suit of pajamas furnished him from Den's wardrobe, was talking to his new friend before going into the bath-room for a scrub.

"What a splendid lot of nerve you showed to-night!" glowed Den.

"Nonsense!" laughed Ben. "Just the ordinary, everyday stand-up grit that every fellow has to have if he's ever to amount to anything."

"I wish I had it," sighed Den, enviously. "Lord, how popular it made you, a stranger here. The men all wanted to shake hands with you. Ben," Brooks went on, seriously, "do you know I've never been that popular in my life—only with toadies who wanted my money."

"You haven't been popular, old fellow," Ben retorted, "because you have been lacking in grit. No one, man or woman, likes a coward. Blustering don't pass for grit. It's too soon found out. But, if you have the real grit, people will soon find it out, and they'll like you, if you're all right other ways. And you're a mighty good fellow,

Den, once you get a little grit to go with the other good qualities."

"Lord, I wish I had some grit," sighed Den, enviously.

"And you're going to have it," laughed Ben. "Isn't that what I'm engaged for—to make an all-around man of you?"

"Success to you, then," smiled Den, queerly. "Heaven knows I want to be a man, and have people like me for myself."

"You'll get grit—loads of it! You've got to!" declared our hero, earnestly. "Now, good night. I'll put out the light and go after my bath."

As Ben stepped out of the tub and began to towel down he heard Den snoring.

Slowly Ben drew on the pajama trowsers, then the blouse.

Den was still snoring.

Then there came another sound—the soft, stealthy raising of one of the windows in Den's room.

"Den asleep and somebody raising his window?" muttered Ben, curiously. "That's a queer combination."

He listened at the key-hole' of the bath-room, and was sure he heard someone moving about in the room, though Den still snored.

"That diamond necklace!" flashed our hero. "Someone knows Den got it, and doesn't know that we put it in the hotel safe."

Ben was just a little shaky, now, as he reached up and turned off the incandescent light in the bath-room. But he was not too much afraid for the job in hand.

Softly he opened the bath-room door.

But there was a squeak just the same.

There was a sudden oath, and Ben found himself looking into the rays from a dark lantern, held by a masked man armed with a revolver.

It was enough to shake a boy's nerve, but Ben, as soon as he found himself face to face with the danger, stopped shaking.

"See here," he called, sternly, as he glided close to the bed, "you'll have to get out of here!"

"Not until I've done for you, then!" roared the hoarse voice of the burglar.

The noise awakened Den, who sat up, with a start.

In a twinkling he realized the deadliness of the danger.

"Let him take anything he wants!" screamed shuddering Den.

"He can take me first!" grated Ben, shoving up the masked man's arm.

Bang!

The pistol's sound was but the starter's shot for one of the toughest fights that ever a boy put up.

CHAPTER IV.

BEN FACES THE MUSIC.

"Look out! He'll kill us!" screamed Den.

That youth's action was just what might have been expected of him.

He rolled out of bed, then under it!

There he lay, his heart beating as if it would stifle him.

But Ben, in the same instant that he had knocked the burglar's arm up, grappled with the fellow.

"You've spoiled my job, and I'll kill you for it!" gritted the man.

His strength was doubly more powerful than Ben's.

Our hero held on desperately, striving, above all, to prevent the fellow from turning the muzzle of the revolver around where he could use it.

"Den!" panted our hero. "Get up and press the button. Keep pressing it, and the office will know something is wrong up here."

But there was no reply from Den Brooks, who was nervously trying to give the idea that he had faded from earth altogether.

Swing! The masked man twisted his body around to the right, trying to free himself from Ben's panting, desperate clutch.

He didn't succeed, but he did succeed in getting his left knee free for use.

Bump! The broad point of that heavy knee struck Ben Freeman full in the abdomen.

It was a jarring, dazing, wind-jolting blow.

Ben sank to the floor with a helpless gasp.

Standing quickly erect, the burglar commanded:

"Come out from under that bed!"

"O-o-o-o-oh!" came Den's scared gasp.

"Come out—and quick!—or you'll get shot!" was the ugly command.

"Y-y-y-you won't hurt me—if I d-do come out?" faltered Den.

"Come out from under that bed," ordered the burglar, "or I'll shoot under and wind you up. Come out quick, too, and don't make any noise."

There had been no sound so far in the corridors, and the burglar began to feel that the noise of the shot had passed unnoticed in the night.

Scared to death, his face as white as chalk, Den crawled slowly out.

"Get up!" ordered the burglar.

Den stood up, but was obliged to hold on to the foot of the bed to keep himself from toppling over with fright.

Ben still lay on the floor.

He knew what was passing, but pretended that he didn't, for he wanted to gain strength and wind for the fight that he felt was yet to follow.

"Get that diamond necklace and hand it to me," ordered the burglar.

"W-w-why," stammered Den, faintly, "that's down in the hotel safe."

"Don't toss any bluffs like that my way," warned the burglar. "You were seen to bring it to this room."

"But it was t-t-taken to the hotel office th-th-this evening," protested Den. "Please believe me, sir."

"Believe nothing," snarled the burglar. "Produce that necklace at once, or I'll crack you over the head and finish

you. I'll finish that knocked-out chap down there, too, and then I'll have time to look around for myself."

"It isn't here," pleaded Den, hoarsely. "Please believe me. Wait! I'll get the hotel's receipt and show it to you, if you please won't hurt me."

"Hand me the diamonds themselves, or take what's coming to you," warned the fellow, making a move toward Den.

"He means that, too!" flashed through Ben's mind.

Our hero was watching and waiting for his chance; waiting, too, to get enough of his wind back.

But now he saw that he must fight, wind or no wind.

Like a flash he was on his knees, then threw himself forward.

Grip! He had his arms wrapped around the burglar's knees.

"Let go, or I'll shoot you!" raged the fellow, lowering the muzzle of the weapon.

"Look out—he'll kill you!" screamed Den.

The burglar tried to. He pointed the muzzle full at the top of Ben's head.

But our hero had got that grip, and had the man unsteady on his feet.

Bang!

But just the second before Ben Freeman had thrown the whole weight of his kneeling body against the burglar's middle, while at the same time pulling those captured legs toward him.

Pulled off his balance, pushed off his balance, in that fashion, the burglar toppled over backwards, clutching at the air, just as the pistol exploded.

The bullet whizzed by frightened Den's ear, burying itself in the wall.

Crash! The masked man's head struck against a chair, as he fell.

There he lay, quiet, a pool of blood forming under his head.

Ben, panting and fighting exhaustion, threw himself on the fellow's chest.

"Press that button! Ring for help, Den!" ordered Freeman.

Den, seeing the dangerous one down and still, mustered up courage enough to obey.

He went even further, opening the door and shouting down the corridor for help.

Help was at hand. That second shot had been heard, and its meaning guessed at. The night clerk, two bellboys, and a porter were running through the corridor.

At the first sound from Den they rushed into the room.

"You can take him now," sighed Ben. "And look out, for I believe he's coming to."

The porter, a husky Irishman, sat down on the burglar, holding him coolly.

Rapidly the clerk questioned, and rapidly our hero answered.

And, gasping with amazement, Den Brooks stood by and

heard Ben coolly ascribe to him—Den Brooks!—the great share of the credit for a nervy capture.

Guests came hurrying in now. But the night-clerk, who was business-like, and who didn't care to have the whole hotel aroused, ordered the burglar dragged away and turned over to the hotel detective, who was now dressing in haste.

Then the guests were politely shooed out, and the two boys left to themselves.

"Say," gasped Den, protestingly, "you laid it on pretty thick about my helping."

"That's all right," laughed Ben, cheerfully. "That starts your reputation for not balking at a fight. And, hang you, Den, you've got to live up to that reputation!"

"But I don't want to sail under false colors," protested Den, honestly.

"Live up to the new reputation that you've got, and there won't be any false colors up aloft," smiled Ben. "It often happens that a fellow who has been quiet and retiring all his life suddenly blooms out as one of the grittiest of the gritty. Make up your mind that you have, Den!"

"No; I'll tell the truth about it in the morning."

"You do that," uttered Ben, bluntly, "and I'll thump you in bully good shape myself. Now, get into bed and get ready for that rest that you must have."

"I won't sleep a wink the rest of the night," objected the new hero.

"Oh, pshaw! Then I'll stay here and sleep with you."

* * * * *

Jessica Holland was not visible in the dining room the next morning.

Neither was Ferdinand Laylor.

But the boys did not lack for interest during the morning meal.

Plenty of men and women crowded around their table, congratulating them and asking questions.

Again Den's grit was brought well to the fore, and poor Brooks, not daring to dispute his friend, took on new lustre as a modestly brave fellow.

"I suppose I'd better get up to my room," whispered Den, after breakfast was over. "I can't stand all this talk about my nerve."

"All right," smiled Ben. "I'm going to take a little turn on the porch, and then I'll run up."

At the angle of the north porch, as Ben strolled, he saw the flutter of a skirt.

As he rounded the angle he came face to face with Jessica Holland.

That young woman regarded him very intently.

"Mr. Freeman, if you won't think me impertinent, I want to ask you a question," Jessica began, coaxingly.

"I'm very certain that Miss Holland wouldn't know how to be impertinent," Ben returned, pleasantly, as he lifted his hat—one of Den's good hats, rather.

"Will you answer me frankly," pleaded Jessica, who knew how to throw a great deal of sad sweetness into her eyes when she wanted to.

"If it's possible," agreed Ben, easily.

"I'm afraid Mr. Brooks is offended at something I've said or done," Jessica went on, slowly, but playing the battery of her eyes on Ben's. "It distresses me greatly. Can you give me any inkling as to why he should have sent an almost rude message to me last night?"

"May I make a suggestion?" queried Ben.

"Do, please!"

"Wouldn't it be better to ask the information from Mr. Brooks himself?"

"Perhaps so," nodded Jessica, doubtfully. "But I thought perhaps you could help me, Mr. Freeman. I'm dreadfully afraid of another snub if I speak to Mr. Brooks. Can't you give me just a hint of why he's angry with me?"

"I'm terribly sorry to say that I can't," Ben replied, promptly.

Jessica looked at him keenly, but Ben's eyes met her own fully and frankly.

"Oh, very well, then. Pardon my stopping you to ask you," said Jessica.

Lifting his hat, and bowing politely, Ben strolled on.

"You're the cause of this! I know it! Oh, how I hate you, Freeman!" flamed Jessica, under her breath, as she clenched her shapely little hands.

"You seem disturbed, Miss Holland," remarked a young man who had come upon her unawares.

"Oh, good-morning, Mr. Laylor!" cried Jessica, but with artful coolness. "How are you feeling, after your—your late encounter?"

Laylor flushed, then whitened under the girl's searching gaze.

"If you're looking for that fellow Freeman," said Jessica, with scornful emphasis on our hero's name, "he just went that way."

"I am looking for him," confessed Laylor, stung by the implied taunt, as the girl had meant that he should be.

"You are going to treat the fellow's boorishness as it should be treated?" asked Jessica, regarding Laylor with some interest.

"Why, how should it be treated, except by a thumping back?" demanded Ferd Laylor, eagerly.

"I suppose that would be exactly the way, if the fellow were your equal," Jessica agreed, slowly. "But are you sure, Ferd, that you could get the better of it in a fight with fists?"

That use of his first name suddenly thrilled the young man. It was the first time that Jessica had ever addressed him thus.

"I can't be more than thrashed if I try," he proposed, eagerly.

"And that would put Freeman's stock up all the higher, and yours lower, if he gave you a jolly good trouncing," suggested the girl, artfully. "Isn't there some other way of punishing the fellow that's more worthy of a gentleman like yourself? Isn't there some way that you can put the

impudent upstart where he belongs without soiling your own hands with him?"

"Why, what way?" cried Laylor, looking at her intently.

"Dear me," protested Jessica, in pretended amazement, "you don't expect me to know, do you? That's a man's game, not a woman's."

"But you have been good enough to take an interest," cried Laylor.

"I'll take interest enough now, to stroll with you for a while, if you care to take me down through the park," proposed Jessica, with a smile so friendly and entrancing that Laylor was at once her slave.

Ben, in the meantime, had continued his walk all the way around the great long porch.

He was just back at the main entrance again when he encountered Herr Knapp, the German inventor.

"Ah, Herr Freeman, good-morning!" hailed the inventor. "This is fortunate! I very much want a few words with you!"

"So?" asked Ben.

Herr Knapp linked his arm with the boy's.

"There are some little rooms inside where we can talk," suggested Herr Knapp. "Let me show you to one."

"I'll go along and have a peep at his game," thought Ben, full of interest at once.

Off the hotel office was a writing-room. Leading off of that were three or four little private rooms, each furnished with a desk and some chairs.

Herr Knapp ushered the boy into one of these rooms, then closed the door after them.

Ben pretended not to notice that the inventor had locked the door and dropped the key into his pocket.

"I have been thinking much, for hours, in fact, about our interview of yesterday," began Herr Knapp, eagerly, as he fixed his gleaming eyes on our hero's face.

"Have you put the proposition into writing yet?" asked Ben.

"Ach, no! There has not been time. Besides, I would have to say too much on paper! Now, Herr Freeman," went on the German, cunningly, "I will not beat about the bush, or make mystery with you. I can see well that you have a new and strong influence over Herr Brooks. So I will make a compromise with you, and we shall both prosper."

"And my friend Brooks will prosper with us, too, I suppose," smiled Ben.

"Brooks? Bah! He is a baby—a booby!" declared the German, candidly. "You and I are two men with brains. Now, listen, and I will show you what we can do. I have tried to get Herr Brooks to put up fifty thousand on my invention. I would have succeeded, too, had you not come on the scene. Very good; we will not quarrel, you and I, Herr Freeman. We both have brains, and we will prosper together."

"Oho!" thought Ben. "That backs my judgment up. This fellow is a skeeter and blackguard to the backbone."

"We will no longer talk of a mere fifty thousand," continued Knapp, in an eager whisper. "We will go in boldly now for a hundred thousand, you and I! With your influence over Herr Brooks we will get the money easily. Then for the division! Do you understand? You and I will each have fifty thousand dollars!"

Ben rose from his chair, looking keenly at the inventor.

"Herr Knapp," he remarked easily, "you're quite as big a blackguard and thief as I had supposed!"

"What do you mean?" hissed the German, hoarsely, also leaping to his feet.

"I mean only that I shall report this conversation to my friend, who will decline to see you in the future."

"You don't mean it!" raged the German. "You would be throwing away your own fifty thousand, too! Herr Brooks may pay you, and may pay you well, but it would be a long time before he would make up to you the fifty thousand that I can help you to get within a week!"

"Since when, Herr Knapp," demanded the boy, "did you insult me enough in your mind to think that I'd sell out a trusting friend like any dirty thief?"

"Bah!" sneered the half-crazy yet crafty inventor. "Don't play virtue with me. I am too old for that."

"I don't want to play anything with you," retorted Ben, flushing. "I'll just trouble you to unlock that door, and let it go at that."

"But wait!" urged the German, anxiously. "I'll explain. I'll make my offer sound better."

"If you say anything more at all I'll break your face!" declared Ben Freeman, flaring up.

"So?" roared the inventor. "Now you insult me?—threaten me?"

"I tell you to unlock that door, or I'll pound your face and then take the key away from you!"

"So! You will, eh?"

Herr Knapp backed away from the stalwart young fellow, and dove deep into one of his pockets.

He fished out a round glass ball, some two inches in diameter.

High explosives are my specialty!" he hissed. "I've studied them all my life. Do you know what this is, booby? A bomb! Powerful enough to wreck this end of the hotel and tear us into small bits!"

Ben started back, then tried to steel his face as he replied, with pretended carelessness:

"Yes? Then put it back in your pocket."

"I will not!" hissed the mad inventor. "Listen! If you get in my way, as you threaten to do, I'm a ruined man. All my life I have been poor—half the time hungry! Now you say you will spoil my plans? Ach! If you do you shall cease to live, and I will go to a happier world with you. Now do you understand, Herr Freeman?"

There was the light of insane purpose in the mad inventor's eyes at this moment.

A hoarse cry of horror escaped Ben Freeman as he faced those glaring eyes.

CHAPTER V.

WAR DECLARED!

But in another instant Ben Freeman's whole mood changed.

In Herr Knapp's wild eyes he read that nothing but extreme coolness could put off a double tragedy.

"He means it!" muttered Ben, under his breath.

"Well," sneered the mad inventor, "what say you now, booby?"

He leered triumphantly at the American boy, who, he felt sure, he had cornered.

To the inventor's intense amazement Ben broke into a hearty laugh.

"Why do you try to fool me with a toy like that, Herr Knapp?" demanded Ben.

"A toy? This?" roared Knapp. "A toy! This small glass bulb, booby, holds the lives of at least a score of people. If I throw it down, so"—the German made a move as if to throw the bomb to the floor—"pouff! And we sail into the air in small bits, and a score of people journey to the next world with us!"

Ben's lips curled in a scornful smile, as if he did not believe a word of this.

"Dreadful!" he muttered, jeeringly.

"Booby, you are fool enough to doubt?"

"Let me have that glass ball, Herr Knapp, and I'll throw it on the floor with all my might. I'll call your bluff, and show you to your face that there's nothing in the bomb!"

Ben made a step forward, as if to seize the bomb.

But Herr Knapp, stretching out his left hand, pushed the boy back.

"You are crazy, to think of such a thing!" roared the German. "It would destroy us both in a second."

"Well, that's what you want, isn't it?" demanded the cornered boy. "Let me have the thing, and I'll see if you've been lying to me."

Again he made a slight movement forward, but again the mad inventor thrust him back.

"Oh, well," muttered Ben, "throw it yourself, then, if you're going to be a hog about it."

Herr Knapp's jaw seemed to fall.

"You want me to do it?" he faltered.

"I don't care a hang whether you do or not," retorted Ben. "Only either drop your toy torpedo, or else unlock the door. I'm tired of this playing."

The mad inventor began to think swiftly.

"See here, booby," he proposed. "You shall have the bomb—but not to drop it in here—not as you value your life. But, after we part, go up in one of the high mountains and throw this thing down into a gully. Then you shall see that I am no dreamer, no liar. Then you will understand how easily I can destroy you at any moment. Then you will do what I want, rather than have me for

an enemy. Come, do you agree to take the bomb, and test it as I have said?"

"I'll take the bomb," Ben agreed, coolly, "and I'll test it some day, if I don't forget."

"Ach! You will not forget," leered the mad inventor, cunningly. "But if you are afraid to throw the bomb yourself, then send it to a chemist, and he will tell you how dangerous this bomb would have been. Come, it is yours, to do as you will with."

Herr Knapp laughed jeeringly as he held the bomb in his outstretched hand.

Ben took it in silence, then his whole manner changed. Stepping back, holding out his left hand to ward off interference, he took a pitcher's aim at the locked door.

"The key, Herr Knapp, or I test this thing now on the door!"

"No, no! Ach, no!" protested the German, turning pale. "DON'T!"

"He wasn't lying, then," mused Ben. "This bomb is loaded with death!"

For Herr Knapp, in addition to showing a face that was as white as chalk, was shaking as if he had difficulty in standing up.

"Put that thing down," he implored.

"Unlock the door, then," propounded Ben, coolly, "or I'll put it down on the door."

"Wait!"

Herr Knapp's trembling fingers produced the key. He fitted it to the lock, throwing the door open.

The German went out first, Ben following him close behind.

Straight over to the hotel desk went our hero, laying the bomb on the desk before the day-clerk.

"This is said to be a bomb," Ben announced, dryly. "For one, I'm inclined to believe it. I got it from that madman, Herr Knapp. You can do as you think best about keeping him out of the hotel after this."

Half a dozen men were standing by. There was commotion in an instant. Everyone asked questions so fast that Ben didn't have half a chance to tell what had happened.

The hotel manager came up. He was shrewd enough to see that the inventor could not be arrested and convicted on one boy's unsupported testimony.

"See that Knapp is kept out of the hotel after this," ordered the manager. "I'll take that supposed bomb, soak it in a pail of water, and then send it to a chemist."

But the guests of the hotel who had overheard spread quickly enough with the story.

No one tried to overtake Herr Knapp, who had stalked moodily out of the hotel. There was an uncanny idea that the inventor might have more bombs about him.

"They can let the fellow go, if they want," mused Ben, bitterly, as he made his way out to the porch.

People were talking excitedly. A throng of them gathered about our hero, asking questions.

Ben strolled up, his face going white in an instant when he realized how narrow an escape our hero had had.

In a few moments more Den had disappeared. It had occurred to him that he might have had the same kind of a time with Herr Knapp at any time—that it might even happen in the unguarded future. The thought made young Brooks feel ill.

"I don't know as Ben Freeman is an unlimited blessing," he muttered to himself, as he entered his rooms. "Nothing so much happened to me until Ben came this way. I seemed to be living in paradise before yesterday. Perhaps it was a fool's paradise, though. But it was easy, and this is getting to be blamed strenuous!"

Guessing what had happened to his friend's nerves, Ben did not attempt to follow, but seated himself in one of the great chairs on the porch on this warm Indian summer day.

By and by Jessica came strolling back to the hotel.

She had heard what had happened, and now she was filled with evil satisfaction, for she had just seen Taylor and Herr Knapp stealing away by themselves.

"They're both hot for vengeance, and they'll make a great combination!" the girl was thinking. "Good! They will do my work for me without my being dragged into it!"

Ben, not seeing Jessica's approach, and thinking it time to go upstairs to Den Brooks, rose and sauntered slowly into the corridor.

Just before he gained the end of the corridor, someone around the corner in the hotel lobby spoke in a woman's laughing voice:

"Have you heard the news about a diamond necklace?"

"No," answered another woman.

Ben stopped short.

"Why, the story runs that young Mr. Brooks bought one. You can guess who he had in mind when he bought it. But the latest news is amusing! This morning the necklace found its way back to the jeweler. It's for sale, at a reduced price. I'd like to know what Miss Somebody thinks to-day—for of course she must know. How folks here will laugh at her when she isn't looking."

Then the two unseen speakers moved on.

But Ben heard a sharp catching of the breath behind him.

Turning, he found Jessica's lively eyes flaming into his.

"Well?" she demanded, bitterly, "are you satisfied, meddler?"

With an angry toss of her head, Jessica swept by the boy.

But her glance had carried its true message—an open, undying declaration of war!

CHAPTR VI.

THE ART OF BEING A FIEND.

"Feel like going fishing this fine day, Den?"

"Not on your life!" grumbled that youth from Easy Street, settling back in his leather arm-chair. "I feel just like finishing this book."

"Well, I'm going to try my luck, then, since you've been good enough to offer me the use of your tackle."

"Luck to you!"

So Ben set off, full of happiness on this bright day of the Indian summer that still lingered.

He had written his mother the good news of his present work, and looked forward to sending her some money soon.

"And I believe I'm going to be worth the money I'm getting," grinned Ben, as he walked briskly along the mountain path. "Certainly I've chased away some of the skeeters that seemed likely to get Den's blood. And I've put more fight into that blood of his already. He seems to be getting more gritty as time goes by."

It was the third day after the meeting with Herr Knapp, whom our hero had not seen since.

It was a little after lunch-time, and our hero hoped to be back for evening dinner with something of a string of mountain perch to show.

"This looks like a good place," murmured Ben, halting, at last.

It was by the side of a stream, a little way off the mountain path.

Ben baited his hook, made the cast, and sat down close to the trunk of a big tree.

Perch require no attention until they are hooked, and begin to bob at the tackle.

"Sorry I didn't bring along a book," mused Ben, as he sat there lazily. "But gracious! what do I want of a book? I've been living the last few days through livelier things than I ever found in a book. And the worst of it seems to be that one-half of my fight has been against a girl pretty enough to eat! Jessica hasn't given up the fight, either! Whew! But hasn't she been spending time over her dressing! I'll warrant she never looked as wholly pretty for three days running in her whole life. And doesn't Den look longingly at her sometimes! That boy will get snared again, if he doesn't look out! Jessica has seen his looks, and she knows what they mean, the flirting adventuress! If I were away for three days I wouldn't wonder if she'd hook him and land him all right, and make him think that the late past was only a bad dream. But she won't get him while I'm around to stop it. Den's too good a fellow at heart to get sold out by a girl of that stamp!"

It wasn't such a good spot for fishing as Ben had supposed it would be.

After half an hour of trying he was about to haul in his line, when—

Whish!

A coiled noose of rope fell over his head.

Jerk! It was pulled tight around his throat, strangling him.

Ben Freeman fought furiously to free himself, but two rough-looking fellows closed in on him.

One of them swiftly slipped a black sack over his head, making it fast at the neck.

"Keep quiet!" warned the other. "If you don't you'll get what the butcher gave the pig!"

Ben was on his face now, his hands being tied behind his back.

"We can carry him now, or make him walk, either," pronounced one of the pair. "If he makes a holler, or a squirm, stick him!"

"Perhaps you won't mind telling me what you want of me," suggested Ben. "It may turn out that you've got the wrong person."

"No, we hain't," declared the party who seemed to be in charge, and who, the boy believed, was the one who had thrown the lasso in such clever cow-boy fashion.

"We got the right party, all right," growled the leader. "Now, up on your feet and march!"

Ben's captors took hold of his arms on either side, leading him along.

"I'd holler," muttered the boy, inwardly, "but what's the good? I know the lonesomeness of this spot as well as they do. And, besides, I believe they'd keep their threat of sticking me."

From the kind of ground they tramped over Ben, though he could not see, knew that they were leading him further into the forest.

At last, when they had gone about a mile, as the boy judged, his escort halted.

"Sit down!" ordered the leader, and Ben, allowing them to place him, found himself sitting on the ground, his back against a tree.

A rope passed around him, binding him securely to the trunk.

Whisk! That black cloth was off and away from his head.

And right then and there Ben Freeman understood, and felt a jolt of nameless fear.

For, facing him, a wicked sneer on his handsome young face, was Ferd Laylor!

"One of your games, eh?" demanded Ben, quickly, with a pretense at pleasantry.

"One of yours, too, I guess," mocked Laylor.

"How is it played?" demanded Ben, with pretended indifference.

"Did you ever hear of a game the boys call Twenty-three?" leered Laylor.

"Played with a skiddoo, isn't it?" smiled Ben.

"I see you've played it," rejoined Laylor, mockingly. "You're going to play it again, and it's your turn to lead!"

"I guess you'd better explain yourself," hinted our hero.

"I'll do so," replied Ferd Laylor, signing to the two rough-looking fellows, who drew off at a distance. "Freeman, you've been getting in my way more than I allow anyone to do."

"How do you stop it?" Ben demanded, tantalizingly.

"I make it convenient for a chap like you to get out of the way," Laylor replied, with equal coolness. "Now, Freeman, I'm not going to make any threats. I shan't even tell you what I'm going to do to you if you don't

come to my way of thinking. But this much I will promise: If you defy me, it will be the last time that you'll ever do it."

"Go on!" mocked Ben. "I'm interested."

"I have two or three little papers here for you to sign," went on Laylor, drawing some loose sheets from an inner pocket. "No; signing, in fact, won't do. You'll have to copy these into your own handwriting and then sign them."

"What kind of papers?" Ben asked, reflectively.

"Well, they're the kind of papers that'll make you feel like skipping after you have signed," Laylor admitted, with a shrug of his shoulders. "One paper sets forth that you've been playing a scoundrelly game to rob young Den Brooks in the end. That paper recites that his friends have interfered, and have made you sign the confession and your promise to go your own way."

"That's a very simple paper," Ben commented, sarcastically.

"Another paper sets forth the fact that you've been playing a big game of bluff, and that your bluff has been called. You admit that you're a liar and a coward."

"Say, that's clever!" cried Ben, with pretended enthusiasm.

"And the third paper," went on Laylor, "is a receipt for two hundred dollars, received from me in payment for dirty work that you've promised to do for me against Den Brooks. You'll never want to face Brooks again after he has read that. And I can state that I paid you the money in order to be able to expose your scoundrelism."

"Any more papers?" jeered Ben.

"That's all."

"It ought to be!"

"But, by the way," Laylor went on, "you really get the two hundred dollars."

He displayed a roll of bills temptingly.

"What for?" our hero demanded.

"Why, the money is really given you in order that you can clear out."

"You've got it all nicely planned, haven't you?" Ben smilingly queried.

"Well, what do you say?" demanded Laylor, looking fixedly at his victim.

"Oh, nothing," yawned Ben, "except that you've been wasting your time."

"You'd better think again!" warned Laylor. "I've hinted that a fearful punishment is before you if you refuse."

"I do refuse."

"If you say that again," threatened Laylor, making ready, "I shall tear these papers up and leave you to—to what happens!"

"Tear 'em up," said Freeman, composedly.

Rip! Laylor's steady hands went through the sheets, tearing them to fine ribbons.

"Good-by," he said crisply, rising.

"Good-by," Ben responded.

Laylor walked away. It sounded, too, as if the two rough-looking characters were following their employer. But Ben, tied where he was, could not see.

"Now, what on earth is the game?" muttered the captive boy.

For one thing, it was late in the afternoon. In the deep forest the light was fading fast.

Buzz-zz-zz-zz! Something flew up close in the gathering darkness, circled around his head, then lighted on one cheek.

"Whew!" muttered the boy. "You've got hot feet! A mosquito? Confound the little pest! This Indian summer spell has given the pests a new leave of life."

So irritating was the tiny torment that Ben could not shake the insect off, try as he would to wriggle and twist his head.

Buzz-zz-zz! Another one coming. Then came a third, and a fourth.

The mosquitoes, finding that their victim could not resist, made the most of their chance.

Ben quickly had a dozen great blotches on his face, neck and hands, and now the little pests were beginning to bore in through his thin silk socks.

"Murder!" quivered the sufferer. "This is getting fiendish!"

Then came another thought that made his heart almost stop:

"Did Ferd Laylor pick out this spot on purpose, because he knew the little pests were thick here? Is this his punishment—the torment that he planned for me? Oh, the unspeakable fiend! Ouch! Oh, oh, oh!"

Truly, the torment was becoming more than infernal!

As the night came down, the mosquitoes grew almost to a buzzing cloud of stormy torment. It was as if the stinging little insects had sent the news far and wide through the forest that here was a great, glorious, unresisting meal!

Nor could Ben free himself. After a quarter of an hour he gave up trying that, and dull despair settled down over him.

"I'll go mad with this if it keeps up another hour!" he groaned, and knew that he spoke the truth.

"Help!" he bellowed, as loudly and frantically as he could.

Again and again he called, as his frenzy grew under the stinging torment of the still hungry mosquitoes.

Then his mind gave way!

CHAPTER VII.

THE BRAIN THAT WENT WRONG.

The torment did not kill.

But it drove a human brain off its balance.

All night Ben sat there, tied to the trunk of the tree.

And all night long the mosquitoes kept at their fearful work.

By daylight there was not a spot on Ben's face that was recognizable as a bit of human face.

Puffed, distorted, all out of shape or seeming of shape, that face was dreadful to look upon.

After daylight some of the mosquitoes disappeared, but enough of them remained to try to find new, unexplored parts of the boy's helpless body.

Within half an hour after he started to scream uselessly for help in that great, wide forest, Ben ceased to shout, for his mind no longer understood what was happening.

Yet all through the night he sobbed and moaned in low tones, restlessly, ceaselessly swaying his head and upper body to and fro under the torment.

At daylight he was wholly, utterly exhausted.

Just barely able to see through his swollen eyelids, even if his brain had been clear, Ben Freeman was not attempting to look at anything.

An hour and more after daylight passed.

Then there sounded in the forest a soft step, a sweet, humming voice.

A pretty girl, fresh and sweet as Nature herself, and clad all in modest Quaker gray, roamed along the path.

Over her left shoulder, hung by a strap, was a long, plain tin can, with a single big lid in the center.

In her right hand were a small pair of scissors and a small, bright knife.

Nance Ferguson, daughter of Professor Ferguson, was astir early, gathering botanical specimens for her father. She bent over to snip off a small plant close to the roots.

As she stood up again, examining her find, Nance started.

A low moan seemed to come from near by.

"Gracious!" she quivered, "is that a human voice?"

She listened. After a little the moan came again. Nance's first act was to turn pale. Then, being a brave girl, she thought swiftly:

"That sounds like a human being in suffering. I must find out."

Resolutely, even though she trembled a bit, Nance went straight in the direction of the sound.

As she trod softly she heard that moan again, and quickened her step to a run.

Then she came upon a sight that made her heart almost stop beating.

"Merciful heaven!" she gasped, leaning against a tree and resting a hand over her heart. "What's fiend's work is this?"

Her heart fairly ached as she stared at Ben's raw, swollen, unhuman-looking face.

In the next instant she was darting forward.

"Oh, you poor fellow!" she almost sobbed.

Slash! Her bright-bladed little knife was swiftly at work.

She had almost freed our hero, when a rough voice growled out:

"Here! Quit that, you jade! Git!"

Through the bushes a rough-looking fellow came hurrying.

"You get away from here!" he ordered.

"You stand back!" defied Nance, with spirit.

Slash! She took another hack at the cords around Ben Freeman's body.

"Show you whether I will or not!" glowered the brute.

He made a swoop for her, and Nance, now sick with terror, sprang to her feet, the knife grasped and ready, but she realized how little chance she would stand against such an adversary.

"Help!" she screamed, dodging back before the fellow's advance.

"Hullo, there!" roared a hoarse voice that made Nance and her enemy halt in the same instant.

"Here! You can't get here a moment too soon!" screamed Nance.

"What's the row?" demanded a strange voice.

On to the scene ran a man, rough and ragged, unkempt and dirty-looking.

But he caught sight of the scared girl and of the ruffian before her, and the manhood in this hard-looking stranger came to the surface.

"What's the matter, little gal?" demanded the newcomer, stopping and surveying the scene with bulging eyes.

"Look at that poor creature in torment!" cried Nance, pointing to struggling Ben. "I want to set him free—to get him where he can be cared for."

"Good idea!" nodded the tramp. "Who's stopping ye?"

"That fiend there!" pulsated Nance, pointing an accusing forefinger at the brute.

"Go right ahead and do yer job, little gal," approved the tramp. "If Mr. Fresh gets in yer way I'll do my best to attend to him."

"Twenty-three for you!" roared the brute at the tramp.

"You'll lose your life hanging around here."

"Ain't much joy in living, anyway, with the winter a-coming on," retorted the tramp, indifferently.

Nance, profiting by the help at hand, ran back to Ben.

"Stop it!" roared the brute.

"And you stop it, too, Mr. Fresh!" roared the tramp, bounding forward between vimful Nance and danger.

The two men were locked in fearful, deadly combat now.

But Nance, with eyes only for the suffering Ben, rested a hand on his swollen forehead to still his still frantic struggles to get free.

"Wait!" she coaxed. "Be easy! I'll soon have you free!"

Slash! Slash!

The two rough fighters were rolling on the ground now, cursing, growling, ready to tear at each other like wild beasts.

But the brute, rather the quicker and stronger fighter of the two, was rapidly getting the better of it.

"There, you're free, poor fellow!" cried Nance, with tears in her eyes, as the last cord slipped away from the boy and his hands were loose.

Ben Freeman, though all the clearness of his mind

was gone, though his arms were numb, though agony had sapped his strength away, still had the fighting instinct left in that fevered blood of his.

Dimly through his almost closed eyes he saw what was going on on the ground just beyond him.

Some wild instinct told him, too, that his own champion was getting the worst of it.

"Oh—mercy!" screamed Nance, faintly.

For Ben, pulling himself together, tottered to his feet, tried to shake the cramps out of his arms.

Then, his fearfully swollen face looking more savage than ever it had before, he sprang forward.

Unreasoning fury lent him strength.

He leaped upon the brute from behind, wound his cramped fingers around the ruffian's throat, and tugged like a bear in a trap.

It was too much for the brute. He went over backward, while Ben rolled over on the ground, panting and used up.

In a twinkling the tramp was on top.

There was a tug, a wrench, a scream from the brute. It had all happened before dismayed Nance could understand what was up.

Then the tramp was on his feet, tugging under the left shoulder of his opponent.

"Come, get up, Mr. Fresh," growled the tramp. "Skidoo, in twenty-three time!"

Groaning, cursing, the brute darted away.

"Sorry, miss," said the tramp, apologetically, "but I had to do it."

"Do what?" asked Nance, looking up with wide open eyes from our hero, beside whom she was kneeling.

"I had to break Mr. Fresh's arm when I got that chance. It was the only way to stop him from making a lot of trouble for us. Lord, Lord! Look at that poor fellow! Ain't he a sight? But what wildeat grit he showed! I didn't think it of him, neither!"

"You know him?" asked Nance, in quick appeal.

"No, but I know them clothes!" answered the tramp. "It's the same feller that tossed me a fiver one day when I was more than usual hungry."

Ben had on the same suit that Den had worn on a former meeting with a knight of the road.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FOE THAT CAN'T QUIT.

When Ben next opened his eyes to reason they rested on a white-capped woman in a striped blue and white gown who sat beside his bed.

That nurse was looking at him as his eyes unclosed.

"How's your head?" she asked, softly.

"All right, I reckon," murmured the boy.

"I see that it is," nodded the nurse. "Be thankful for it, too."

"What on earth has happened?" murmured Ben, curiously.

"Don't you remember?"

"The last that I remember——" began Ben, slowly, hesitatingly.

Then his face took on a swift, overspreading look of terror.

"Ugh! Ouch! Those fearful mosquitoes!"

"There! Keep cool. It's all right," urged the nurse. "You're over it, and you're going to be well enough to get up after breakfast."

Her soothing hand was on his brow, and Ben quieted.

"What has happened since?" he asked, searching his own rather blank mind.

"Oh, we've had a pretty tough time with you," smiled the nurse. "Your system was full of poison from the mosquitoes, and we feared brain fever, too. But the doctor has kept you drugged for four days, while he fought the poison out of your system. Last night the doctor said your head ought to be clear when you waked up this morning. And there's hardly a lump left on your face now. See!"

The nurse held a small mirror close to him.

Ben could not see the great change, but his face now looked much as usual.

"Now I'll wash your face and hands, and then send word for your breakfast," the nurse went on, cheerily. "After that we'll call in your friend, Mr. Brooks, to help dress you. He's crazy to talk with you—poor fellow!"

Briskly, as she talked, the nurse flew about, getting basin, water, soap and towel ready.

Then she disappeared for a moment, but came back to say that breakfast would soon be on the scene.

It was. Propped up in bed, Ben ate a tasty meal with some relish.

"And now for your friend," murmured the nurse, going toward the bathroom door that connected our hero's room with Den Brooks'.

Den was in the instant he got the word.

"Not a word, Mr. Brooks, until you get your friend dressed and in a chair by the window," commanded the nurse.

"This is just to say how glad I am, old fellow!" disobeyed Den, patting Ben on the shoulder.

Ben, who had expected to be weak after such an illness, was surprised to find that he had a fair amount of strength in crossing the floor on Den's arm.

"Now, I'll leave you two together," went on the nurse, and left the room.

Then Den rattled on eagerly, telling how the tramp and Nance Ferguson, obtaining a wagon, had brought him to the hotel in it.

Nance and her father had been there every day since to inquire after the sick one.

"And how about Jessica?" murmured Ben, with a searching smile.

"Oh, she's around, and still try to get my notice," Den responded, with a shrug of his shoulders. "But I haven't any time to look at her. Say, what a different kind

of a girl Nance Ferguson is! She's the real kind, I tell you!"

"She must be, from what you tell me of her fight for me in the woods. And so that was the same tramp, Den?"

"It was, and he thought it was I that he was bringing here. Now, I want to tell you, Ben, that that tramp is going to have a cosey time of it this winter for what he did for you. You wouldn't know him now, he looks so different. Jim Cosby—that's his name—is all rigged out in new clothes, and he isn't doing a thing but spending money and having a good time."

"What about Laylor?" Ben asked, with sudden vengeance.

"He hasn't been around since you got back here. Say, was he at the bottom of your trouble?"

Ben's eyes flashed darkly as he told of Ferd Laylor's dirty work.

"I half suspected it, and Cosby, Jim Cosby, he was sure," rattled on Den, indignantly. "Cosby wanted to go and hunt Laylor up and thump him."

While they were still talking the doctor came in.

He advised that Ben get downstairs and out of doors with his friend's help.

"You'll be all right to-morrow, or the day after, at the latest," was the doctor's verdict as he left.

Ben was quick to notice the change of things at the hotel.

Fully half of the guests had gone away. The place looked almost deserted.

"Den," murmured Ben, as they sat in chairs on the porch, "you spoke a while ago of traveling this winter, and wanted me to go with you. Do you know, old fellow, I think we might as well start now as any other time."

"Um! You do?" asked Den, without enthusiasm.

"Yes; it will be a good deal better in every way," Ben went on, earnestly.

"Oh, I'm very comfortable here," said Den, reluctantly. "I don't see any need of pulling up stakes from this beautiful spot yet awhile."

But Ben did see a need.

In the first place, Herr Knapp was undoubtedly still about the neighborhood.

The mad inventor was the kind of dangerous lunatic who would sooner or later kill someone if he did not get the money that he wanted.

But, greatest danger of all, as our hero saw it, was Jessica Holland.

"That's the kind of girl that never gives up," our hero told himself. "She'll catch Den on the rebound yet if he stays here long enough. Now, from some things I heard, Jessica and that aunt of hers are running a bit low on cash. If I can get Den started for Europe, or Egypt, or some other old place that's far enough away, I don't believe Jessica will raise the needful to follow us."

"Yes, I think we'd better get away, old fellow," Ben

persisted to his friend. "And you know, Den, you agreed to let me run matters for a little while."

"But why do you want to leave this place?"

"Why do you want to stay, Den?"

Brooks colored under the steady, questioning look of his friend.

"Heavens! Has Jessica been getting in her good work while I've been sick upstairs?" thought Ben, in alarm. "Was all that talk about Nance Ferguson's goodness just a blind to throw me off the track?"

"Well, we'll see about going," said Den, as if to avoid a row that he did not want.

Den soon after went upstairs to get his cigars.

While he was gone several of the guests of the hotel came around Ben's chair to congratulate him on his return to health.

"I've got to mend fairly quick," smiled Ben, as he saw Jessica, her head in the air, walk by at a little distance. "Mr. Brooks and I are going away."

That shot told on Jessica.

Ben saw that, in an instant, out of the corner of his eye.

The girl, though keeping her back still turned to him, stopped in her stroll.

"Going away, eh, Freeman?" asked one of the men. "May I ask where?"

"Egypt, probably, and perhaps on to China and Japan," hazarded Ben. "Den Brooks feels that he's getting rusty, and he wants to see a bit of the world."

"How soon do you expect to go?" asked the questioner.

"Why, if we can get everything ready, we'll most likely leave to-morrow morning."

"Will you?" hissed Jessica, under her breath.

Her face went white, her shapely little hands clenched angrily.

All that Ben saw, covertly, but he did not, of course, hear what she said to herself.

"If you get Den Brooks away from here, Ben Freeman, it will be because I've lost all my cunning and used up my last resource!" Jessica exclaimed passionately under her breath.

CHAPTER IX.

DEN GOES THE PACE.

Ben didn't get away the next morning.

That wasn't Jessica's doings, either.

On that same day that he left his bed Ben Freeman got his first glimpse of sweet Nance Ferguson.

That was what settled his going.

She came with her father, the professor, to make inquiries after his recovery.

Den introduced them, in the hotel parlors, and hovered anxiously around Nance all the time.

But Nance, with the contrariness of girls, seemed much more interested in Ben Freeman.

And Ben, too, became wonderfully interested in his pretty rescuer of the woods.

He didn't dare to admit that he had fallen in love with her, though he would have found that mighty pleasant, too, had not Den already laid claim and siege to Nance.

"Well, she'll keep his mind off Jessica, anyway," sighed Ben. "And Nance is a mighty different sort of girl, if Den can win her."

So Ben made no further talk about going away, but on the next day he and Den called at the professor's house, in a pretty bit of woods on the outskirts of the town.

It was a very modest little home, for the professor, having spent all his life on his science, was anything but wealthy.

Den went again the next day, without inviting his chum.

Ben strolled by himself around the hotel grounds.

But he met Den as that youth was returning from the professor's.

"Been over to see Miss Nance?" was our hero's pleasant greeting.

"Yes," said Den, shortly.

"All well over there?"

"I guess so."

"Did the professor show you any of his collection?"

"No."

"Miss Nance as bright as ever?"

"Oh, I suppose so," growled Den.

Then young Brooks sneaked uneasily away.

"Now, what on earth has hit the poor chap?" wondered Ben. "Did he find some other suitor at the house, who got more of Nance's smiles?"

When Ben went up that evening to see if Den was ready to go down to dinner, Brooks said gloomily that he had a headache.

"I guess there's something more than a headache in the air," muttered Ben.

After dinner, which he ate alone, our hero dropped into the hotel library. There he read for a while, then stepped out on to the porch for a whiff of fresh air.

He had not been there for two minutes when a quick, jaunty step sounded behind him.

It was Den Brooks, his eyes bright, cheeks slightly flushed, and his whole being radiant.

"Ben, old fellow," proposed Den, slapping our hero on the shoulder, "what do you say to hiring an automobile and going for a wild spin to-night?"

"Wouldn't be bad," Ben admitted. "Gotten over the headache, Den?"

"Forgotten that I had one!" responded the youth, boisterously.

"Had anything to eat?"

"Not yet. Suppose we stop at some road-house and eat a great big steak—eh? Hungry as a bear! Whoop!"

"Den!" uttered Ben, in intense astonishment, as he caught a whiff of his chum's breath. "You've been drinking!"

"Well, what of it?" demanded Den, beamingly.

"I never knew you to do that sort of thing before. Is

this a new trick you're going to get, Den? It isn't a manly one."

"Now, what are you driving at?" Brooks demanded, with some resentment. "Going to preach?"

"I should hope preaching on drunkenness wasn't necessary," Ben replied, sadly.

"Now, who's drunk?" flared Den.

"I should say a couple more drinks would put you there."

"You lie!"

Ben gulped down his amazement.

This sort of talk from Den was a wholly new thing.

"Den," our hero retorted, sadly, "you don't know just what you're talking about. Was that any reply to make to the friend who tries to serve you?"

"You started it, with your nagging," flared Den.

"I didn't mean to nag. But, Den, surely you're not going to turn out as a drinking man?"

"I'll take a drink when I want it!"

"I hope you won't want it often."

"And I'll not ask your leave, either!" defied young Brooks.

"You don't have to," Ben retorted, growing a little angry himself. "But there's one thing about your drinking, Den."

"Well, what's that?"

"When I find that Rum is your best friend, I won't stay to be second best."

"Quit your joshing."

"I'm not joshing, Den. But you must understand that I'm not going to be fool enough to tie my future up with that of any young fellow who thinks that rum is the best thing he can find to put into his head."

"You're getting mighty virtuous, all of a sudden," sneered the older youth.

"See here, Den," uttered our hero, taking a tight, vise-like grip on one of his friend's arms and leading him down the porch, "there has been so much of the curse of drink in our family that perhaps I know more about it than you do. Come and sit down, and I'll make clear to you why I mean to quit you unless you can quit drink altogether."

For the next two or three minutes our hero talked earnestly, though gently.

Den soon passed from the joyous mood of the drinker to the tearful one which usually follows.

"I needed something to cheer me up," pleaded Brooks, glumly.

"Cheer you up?"

"Yes; I was all down in the dumps."

"Then something has happened?"

"Yes."

"Am I wrong in asking what, old fellow?"

"Oh," sighed Den, gloomily, and gulping hard, "it's the same old story."

"Same old story?" repeated Ben, thoughtfully. "That expression is usually used to cover a love affair. Are you really in love, Den?"

"Why, I was, old chap," replied Brooks, gloomily.

"Nance Ferguson?"

"Hang it all, yes."

"And drinking is the way you expect to make yourself seem worthy of a girl like that?" demanded Ben, in high disgust.

"She don't think me worthy."

"I shouldn't think she would."

"But I didn't drink anything until—"

"Well? Until when?"

"Until after—"

Den came to a shame-faced pause.

But Ben Freeman began to guess.

"Den, did you propose to Nance Ferguson?"

"Yes."

"And she asked you to wait a while?"

"No, hang it! She made it all too blamed plain."

"What?"

"That it wouldn't do any good to wait!"

"She refused you for good and all?"

"That's what she did!" cried Den, desperately.

Ben's first feeling was one of genuine sorrow for his impulsive friend.

But his next thought was one of wistful happiness for himself.

If Nance had refused Den, then it must be because wealth did not tempt her, and that the man of her heart was yet to offer himself.

"There may be a ghost of a chance for me!" quivered Freeman. "But—oh, Lord, what a fool I am! Nance couldn't see anything in me."

But Den was there, requiring his attention.

"See here, old fellow," hinted our hero, "girls sometimes change their minds. But a girl like Nance won't change her mind just because you make yourself smell like a rum-cask."

"She don't care what I do," muttered Den, gloomily.

"Don't bank on that."

Then Ben fell into more friendly talk about the folly of drinking intoxicating beverages under any circumstances.

He finally persuaded Den to go upstairs, to go to bed and promise to remain there for the night.

"If he gets to sleep that'll be the best thing for him," murmured Freeman. "He'll have more sense—and a headache—when he wakes up."

So our hero went downstairs again, his mind made up to look in on Den in an hour.

While passing through the hotel office Ben happened to glance into the parlor.

Nance Ferguson was seated there, alone.

Our hero went quickly in and over to her.

"We've just paid a short call to friends at the hotel," Nance explained. "Papa asked me to step in here while he went to the cigar stand for some cigars."

So Ben chatted with the pretty girl, glad of this chance, as of any other chance to see her.

"I'd call Den down," Ben explained, presently, "but the poor fellow is abed with a splitting headache."

Which was not so far from the truth, as, if Den didn't have one now, he was rather sure to have one within a few hours.

But presently both of the chatting young people noticed that many minutes had slipped by.

"Do you mind going to find papa, and reminding him?" asked Nance.

Ben went off in haste, but presently he came back, looking somewhat embarrassed.

"Miss Ferguson," he explained, "I'm awfully sorry, but the cigar-stand man said your father went out through that door a quarter of an hour ago, as if on his way home."

Nance, too, looked embarrassed, then laughed.

"Poor papa," she cried. "That's a good deal like him, at times. When he has some new subject on his mind he gets absent-minded about everything else. So he's gone away and left me here. He won't think of me again until it's time to look into my room and say 'good-night.'"

"Fortunately, you're not stranded here," smiled Ben. "I am wholly at your service, Miss Ferguson, now as always."

"I'm afraid I shall have to trouble you," Nance admitted.

Trouble! As if there could be any better fun than a long walk with just the right girl on a cool, clear October night!

Ben thought he was pretty nearly happy when they strolled out through the gate to the hotel grounds.

For Nance had just taken his arm very gently, and her eyes were on his face as he talked.

Lurking in the bushes across the road was a man the sight of whom would have destroyed Ben's present feeling of happiness.

Herr Knapp's mad, flaming eyes followed the young couple.

"The first chance I've had for my revenge!" snarled the inventor. "I am hungry, once more, without the price of food—thanks to that meddlesome young man."

But Herr Knapp did not strike then and there.

He recognized Nance Ferguson, and knew the path through a short stretch of forest that the young people would take on their way home.

"Let you two young people walk half a mile through Fool's Paradise, where Brooks has dwelt all his life!" muttered Knapp, touching softly something in his pocket. "I shall reach that forest ahead of you—and then shall Fool's Paradise change to the Infernal Regions!"

Ben did not try to make love on that stroll, though Nance's rejection of his chum left the field clear to him.

But he talked on brightly, briskly, feeling a thrill every time he glanced down at those bright eyes beside him.

They turned off the highway, at last, into that short stretch of wood-path before the Ferguson home.

"I heard something said about your going away," suggested Nance. "You and Mr. Brooks are going, soon, are you not?"

"Why, it's one of our plans, but there's no date set," Ben answered. "We——"

He stopped like a shot, transfixed with horror.

For there in their path, not ten feet away, bomb in uplifted hand, stood Herr Knapp, in the act of throwing!

CHAPTER X.

JESSICA HAS A GAME OF HER OWN.

Nance saw only the distorted face of the lunatic. She did not in the least guess his purpose.

But Ben did—too late, it seemed.

For Herr Knapp had that bomb high in air overhead in his right hand, calculating the distance, that he might hurl the bomb at their feet.

Ben's right hand was in his coat pocket, resting, as it happened, on his pocket-knife.

There was but an instant.

Ben had no time to think. He acted on instinct. Out flew his right hand.

Whizz-zz! went that pocket-knife.

Straight and true was its swift flight.

It struck the round glass bomb ere it could leave Herr Knapp's hand.

Bang!

That explosion was terrific.

Now at last Nance knew that there was tragedy in the air.

For Ben's right arm, as he let go the knife, wrapped around Nance and shoved her behind him.

As for Herr Knapp, a scream of more than mortal agony burst from his lips.

For the knife had struck the bomb while still it lingered in his uplifted hand.

All the force of the explosion spent itself on that hand.

Ben, standing before startled Nance, saw the mad inventor stagger, reel backward, then wheel around and fall on his side.

Some part of the splintered glass hissed by Ben's ear, but he was otherwise unhurt.

"Oh, oh, oh!" quavered the girl, clinging close to our hero. "What has happened?"

"We're alive, thank heaven!" Ben uttered, fervently.

"But that poor man?"

"Has got his just deserts, I reckon," uttered Ben, grimly.

Herr Knapp lay on the ground, writhing and screaming in his intense agony.

"Let us see what has happened to him!" proposed Nance. "What we can do for him."

"You're right," gritted Ben. "I came near forgetting myself in my anger."

Unclasping the girl's arms, he looked at her.

*Can you stand alone, Nance?"

"Of course I can."

"You're not too upset? You're—you're not going to faint?"

"Faint?" echoed the girl, scornfully.

"I'll look after that poor, mad rascal, then."

"And remember that I'm to help," cried Nance, catching at our hero's nearer hand.

Together they darted forward the few steps that were needed to carry them to the frantic fellow's side.

"Keep quiet," urged Ben, coolly, "and let me see what has happened to you."

"You've blown my hand off—miserable!" shrieked the afflicted one.

"You tried to blow us into Kingdom Come, so I guess you got what was ordered for you," clicked Ben. "Now, keep quiet long enough to let me help you, won't you?"

"You want to torture me!" screamed the inventor.

"Nonsense!"

"Go away and leave me!"

"You'll die if I do," retorted Freeman, growing almost sick as he espied the great pool of blood beside the fellow.

Our hero looked back quickly at Nance.

"You ought to hurry home, Nance," he urged, anxiously.

"Why?" she demanded, quiveringly.

"This is too fearful for you."

"Can I help?"

"Possibly."

"Then I can stand it," declared Nance.

"Go away, both of you!" screamed Herr Knapp. "Have some mercy. Do not torture me!"

"Listen," said Ben, sternly, as he laid gentle hold of the arm that ended in a stump at the wrist. "You're bleeding to death fast, Herr Knapp."

"Then let me die in peace."

"But, if you'll only keep quiet, man, we'll try to save your life, even if it isn't worth much to the world."

"What can we do?" shuddered Nance, fighting hard to keep her nerve in the presence of that great pool of life blood that was ebbing fast away.

"We must rig a tackle around this arm, like lightning," spoke Ben, rapidly. "Here, give me your handkerchief. I'll tie it to my own to tie around the arm."

"Just one second," begged Nance. "I'll do better than that."

She darted nimbly away, behind a great tree.

She came back with an under petticoat in her hands.

"Tear this up," she said, briefly.

"Hurrah! Just the thing!" vented Ben.

He tore two great strips, tied them together and twisted them.

Then he made a stout loop around Herr Knapp's injured arm, just below the elbow.

"We'll stop this business in a jiffy now," uttered the boy, springing up and away.

Just a few steps, and he found what he wanted—a stout stick.

Hurrying back, he thrust this stick through the loop and began to twist.

With every twist of the stick in the loop Freeman brought that loop tighter and tighter.

"You're trying to cut my arm off!" screamed Herr Knapp.

"It may feel like that," Ben retorted, briefly. "But it's the only thing that'll stop the flow of blood until you can reach a doctor. This is your only hope for life, man, so keep as quiet as you can."

At last our hero had the loop twisted as tight as it could be made, completely shutting off the flow of blood through the arteries below the elbow.

At the same time, the stick now ran in the same direction as the arm.

With more strips from Nance's petticoat the boy lashed the stick fast to the arm near both ends.

"There," said Ben, settling back on his haunches and surveying his work. "That isn't a very handsome-looking job, but the loss of blood is stopped now, Herr Knapp. Probably a doctor can fix you up."

"Why did you do it?" asked the German, curiously.

"Oh, you're a human being," Ben answered, carelessly.

"You think I will live?"

"If you reach a doctor who knows his business."

"Ach! You have a good heart, after all, Herr Freeman. I shall not forget you."

"Now, on the whole," smiled Ben, grimly, "I think I would rather you did forget me."

The inventor groaned.

"Nance," directed the youth, "help me, if you can, to lift this fellow away from this spot without hurting him. We don't want to leave him lying in his own blood."

Ben supplied the strength, Nance the tenderness and the direction, as they raised and bore the shattered inventor a few feet away, propping his back against the trunk of a big tree.

"It's my place to see this young lady home," Ben announced, halting in front of his shattered enemy. "You'll be all right here for a few minutes. Then I'll come back and help you to get to a doctor. Don't interfere with that loop on your arm, or you'll bleed to death in a jiffy!"

Then our hero turned to the girl.

"Nance," he said, briskly, as if the girl were under his orders, "hurry away from this scene now."

He placed one arm boldly around her, hurrying her through the woods.

As he went he told her the story of Herr Knapp's enmity, and the reasons for it.

"Nance," cried the boy, as they came out of the woods, and in sight of the Ferguson home, "what a brick of a girl you are when there's trouble!"

"Why do you say that?" she asked, looking at him with eyes that were big with surprise.

"I'm thinking, Nance, of the grand fight you put up for me in the woods the other day."

"You have only my word for that," she half-smiled.

"No, I haven't! Jim Cosby, the ex-tramp, has told me more than ever you'd have told me. And to-night! We were within an ace of being blown to bits, yet you haven't whimpered once."

"Why should I?"

"I don't know," Ben admitted, candidly. "But most girls would have flunked, and a good many fellows, too."

Professor Ferguson was in his library.

In his utter absent-mindedness it had not occurred to him that Nance had not come home with him until he saw the two young people walking into the room.

Then the professor quickly found something still more astonishing to think about as he listened to the marvelous tale that the two young people told him.

"I must hurry back to the poor rascal, now," finished Ben.

"Bless me, I'll go with you," proposed the professor.

"You won't forget to come home again, will you, sir?" laughed Ben.

"No, I think not," the professor replied, soberly.

As they were leaving the house Nance stepped forward, giving Ben's hand a swift, fervid grip.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"For what?"

"For being so brave and unconcerned, and for having the presence of mind that saved us from that awful death."

"Humph!" uttered Ben, drily. "That wouldn't be much for any man to brag about."

Yet he was wonderfully happy as he hurried through the woods with the professor.

But, when they reached the spot, the boy halted, tempted to rub his eyes.

Herr Knapp was no longer there.

"I'd think it all a dream," Ben declared, "only there's the pool of blood. And here's what's left of my knife. Whew! It must have gone straight up in the air and come down."

"The bomb," declared Professor Ferguson, "was made, then, of one of the explosives whose whole force, on discharge, is upwards. That account for the fact that you and Nance were not injured and that the German lost only his uplifted hand."

"Then, if that infernal bomb had struck the ground at our feet—" shuddered the boy.

"You two young people would have been torn to shreds!" replied the professor, also with a shudder. "Bless me! How strange the tale all seems! If I didn't know Nance to be so truthful, I might suspect that you young people had been romancing."

"There's the blood there—almost a quart of it," returned Ben, drily. "You can't get around that, professor. But what can have become of Knapp?"

"Why, it seems certain," replied Professor Ferguson, "that he found he had strength enough to rise and hurry

on toward the village. He dared not wait, for fear, perhaps—"

"That I'd be ugly and vengeful, as soon as I was clear of the young lady?" finished Freeman. "Poor Knapp, what a poor idea he had of me!"

"Very few enemies would be forgiving enough to bind up the wounds of the attempted assassin," murmured the professor.

"Well, sir, we can do nothing by remaining here, so I'm going to see you back to your door, sir, if you don't object."

"You wish to make sure that I don't forget to return to my child?" smiled Professor Ferguson. "Young man, I do not blame you, after my foolish break this evening. A break, too, by the way," he added, sadly, "that cost one man dear."

"If you're thinking of Knapp," Ben objected, "don't! To-night's affair didn't turn out so badly. If Knapp hadn't had this chance, he might have found another where he'd have had things all his own way."

Ben saw Professor Ferguson as far as the latter's doorstep, then, with much, indeed, to think of, strolled quickly back to the hotel.

"I'll go up and see how Dan's feeling," thought the boy, as he crossed the hotel office to the elevator.

"Going upstairs to get dressed?" grinned the elevator boy.

"Dressed?" queried Ben. "What do you mean? I'm going up to see my friend, Mr. Brooks."

"Then I guess you don't know," grinned the elevator boy.

"Know what?"

"You'd better take a trot to the ladies' parlor and see what's doing there!"

Filled with a strange misgiving, over what he couldn't understand, Ben Freeman turned and made his way hastily to the ladies' parlor.

"Strange wedding, isn't it?" he heard one man ask another, as he crossed the hotel lobby.

"Well, she's hooked him at last," laughed the other.

Then Ben looked in through the door of the parlor—and staggered.

There stood Den Brooks, leering and slightly more tipsy than when our hero last saw him.

At his side, smiling sweetly, was Jessica Holland, attired all in white.

And over beyond, at a table, stood a man whom our hero knew—the local justice of the peace.

That gentleman learned in the law was looking through his book, hunting for the place of the marriage service.

"Oh, we'll be married in two minutes now," leered Den Brooks to a woman guest of the hotel, who was congratulating the couple. "Had a little spat, you know, Jessica and I. But we made it up. And now we're going to be happy forever after, as the story books say!"

"Thunderation!" was all startled Ben Freeman could gasp.

CHAPTER XI.

BEN TRIES THE STRONG HAND.

It was a facer—a paralyzer!

"Tricked—joshed—jobbed!" Ben gulped down in the next instant of dismay.

Then the almost admiring tribute burst from him:

"Jessica's a wonder!"

Could the wedding be stopped? Hindered? Delayed?

Ben knew better than to try to do anything wild, by mere force.

Nor could he make any scene.

Den, in his maudlin condition, would only order his chum expelled from the room.

"Jimminy!" gurgled Ben, then turned and fled.

Fled—but not to defeat.

For Ben Freeman's style of fighter is never truly defeated until he is dead.

"They didn't see me in the parlor. I hope they won't hear I'm around," he quivered, as he raced for the porch.

Out on the grounds just beyond the porch our hero had exchanged nods with Jim Cosby, the ex-tramp, as he entered the hotel a little while before.

"Yes; there was Jim, still near at hand, strolling down the driveway toward the gate.

"Jim! Here! On the jump!" bawled Ben, as he leaped down the steps.

"What's up, boss?" demanded Cosby as they met.

"Don't stop to ask questions, Jim, but run to the stable. Get a pair of horses and a covered hack. You'll drive yourself—understand? And give this five-dollar bill to the stable hands. Tell 'em there's more coming. And remember I don't want any driver but you. Meet me at those bushes down by the gateway! And—hustle!"

Ben's feverish eyes, his flushed face, his quick, sharp breathing said even more than his words.

Jim didn't comprehend, but he didn't need to.

He was away on the jump.

And now Ben, having reached the appointed meeting-place, pulled out a note-book and a fountain-pen.

"Lucky that Den doesn't know my handwriting!" breathed the hurried youngster, as he wrote.

It didn't take long, for Ben wrote at lightning speed, barely able as he was to see a single character that he penned.

"Forgery—and something more dangerous still!" he panted, as he finished and dropped the pen back in a pocket. "But I can't help it! This is a case where I've got to take the only, single chance that there seems to be left."

Lighting a small wax match, he held it over the paper as he hastily scanned what he had written:

"Dear Mr. Brooks:

"Your guardian has just died, leaving you sole heir to his enormous fortune—but under certain conditions. These must be met at once. I am aware that your wedding is about to take place, and I don't want to come on the scene with the news of a death. But I must see you

outside, and at once. Come without an instant's delay, even if in the middle of the service! I must get your instructions and get the next train to town in order to carry out the conditions of the late Mr. Grant's will. Don't keep me waiting a second. Come to me on the run!"

"J. F. Wright, Attorney-at-Law."

A clatter of hoofs, a rumble of wheels!

Jim Cosby, true to his task, was driving up now at a gallop.

"Here you are, Jim," breathed the young plotter. "Take this in to the ladies' parlor, and see that it gets into Mr. Brooks's hands, even if you have to interrupt the service. You needn't be particular about the lady seeing it, but she can if she insists. If they ask you if you have seen me, swear that you haven't. Tell them that this note was given to you by an elderly man who carries a green cloth bag. Tell Den that the lawyer is in a dreadful hurry. When you get him outside, make him run here. And don't let anyone else come with him! Now, scoot!"

Jim was off, with great leaps, while Ben darted back into the bushes.

Tortured Ben felt as if hours must have gone by.

Ah! Now the sound of running feet.

"Here they come!" quivered the young plotter. "Yes, that's Den with Jim! And nobody with them! Good! Glorious—if Jim doesn't balk!"

Out of breath, Den halted close beside the carriage.

"Mr. Wright!" panted Den Brooks.

Up out of the bushes rose Ben Freeman.

Den gave a startled little gasp.

Grip! Ben had his chum by the throat, and bore him to the ground.

"Jim!" panted our hero. "Help me! It's the last chance to save Den Brooks for life!"

In a few moments, Den, without having had any chance to cry out, was bound and gagged, helpless, but boiling over with rage.

"Help me to lift him into the cab, Jim," urged our hero. Den was thrust in on the back seat.

Ben Freeman held him there, while he turned to the ex-tramp.

"Jim, we can save Den Brooks from something worse'n death, if you will stand by me."

"I'll do it," said the ex-tramp, huskily.

"You know what we're doing?"

"You do, anyway."

"I mean—you know it's against the law."

"It ain't the first thing I've done against the law," declared Cosby, with a grin.

Then Ben gave hurried directions for the driving, and got in beside his friend.

The cab rolled away, and Ben, peering backward through the rear window, saw that pursuit had not yet started.

It was out in the deep forest that Jim Cosby halted the cab horses.

Now he got down to consult with our hero.

"Where do you want to go now, boss?" asked the ex-tramp.

"Jim, in your road days around through this country you must have picked up a knowledge of where the lonely, unoccupied houses are?"

Jim scratched his head.

"Say," he remarked at last, "I think I know the place."

"It's lonely enough?"

"Right in the woods."

"And strong enough?"

"Well," grinned Jim, "there's one strong cellar room that hasn't got any windows—nothing but a trap door."

"I guess that's the place, then."

Nodding, Jim went back to the box and drove on.

Within a few minutes he halted once more.

"This is the nearest the road goes to the place," he announced, opening the cab door.

"Help me get him out, then."

Jim replied by hoisting the helpless young Mr. Brooks up on to one of his shoulders.

In silence Jim led the way under the trees.

Jim stopped at length before the house, an old but not yet tumble-down, story-and-a-half house, whose windows were boarded up.

Laying his human burden on the ground, Jim went around the house, and soon reappeared, opening the door.

"We'll have to take one of them cab lights for a lamp," suggested Cosby.

"And, as long as we're up against the law anyway, we'll keep the light, and also the carriage robes, until this thing either blows over or lands us in prison."

They carried Den inside, lowered him into the cellar through the trap, made him comfortable on the carriage robes, and there they left him.

"Now, Jim, I want you to go to the nearest telegraph station—not at the hotel town—and send a message for me. At this time of the night you'll have to wake the operator up. But get him up and make him send my message through, no matter what you have to pay. And, as I haven't much money left, and you may need a good bit—why, we'll have to borrow Den's purse."

Ben reached down, slipped a hand into Den's coat and drew forth a well-filled pocket-book, which he handed to Jim, saying with a smile:

"Highway robbery added to our other crimes, Cosby. But never mind! I'll pull you through, somehow, and you'll be a good deal richer into the bargain."

Jim was also instructed to bring back food with him.

For fear that the cab might be recognized and followed to this place, Jim was instructed to go on foot. That meant nearly a five-mile tramp each way.

Then, in the interval, Ben settled himself down on the carriage robes in the cellar, beside the friend he was trying to serve at all risk.

It was nearly daylight when Jim got back, but he had sent the message, and he had the food.

"Gracious! That looks good. I'll eat some myself," uttered our hero.

While Jim was getting things ready in that quiet cellar, Ben reached over and unloosened the gag from Den's mouth.

"Breakfast with us, old chap?" he inquired, pleasantly.

"You'll be eating your breakfast behind bars before long—both of you!" roared Den Brooks.

"Most likely," assented Ben, as he dipped into the grub and began to eat with great relish.

Den relapsed into snorting silence.

He only scowled when he was offered food.

Ben, finished at last, rose to climb up through the trap.

"Keep a mighty close eye, won't you, Jim?" urged Ben. "Stay here with the young man until I come to you again. Good-by—and be vigilant!"

Half an hour later, just at the darkest moment before dawn, Ben Freeman left the cab on the highway not far from the hotel.

"Those horses will know enough to go back to the stable by themselves," Ben reflected, as he left the rig.

For himself, he didn't go around to the main entrance.

Instead, our hero dodged in at one of the servants' entrances.

At that early morning hour he passed two of the servants as he hurried to his rooms—and Den's.

Ben let himself in quickly, then as quickly put the double lock on his door and on Den's.

"They can't get in by the windows. It's too high up, unless they use ladders," reflected our hero.

Then, with a smile, he laid out on a bureau the food he had brought with him from the detention-pen in the woods.

The heavy tread of feet sounded now in the hallway.

Rap-a-tap-tap! sounded on the door, followed by the hail of:

"Open in the name of the law!"

"What's wanted?" called Ben, coolly, through the door.

"You are!" answered the voice. "I'm John Davis, deputy sheriff of this county, and I want you for abduction!"

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

"Got who? Me?" called smiling Ben, showing his face at the open transom over the door.

Just before his door he espied two officers.

Right at their backs was Jessica Holland, haggard, pale and with great dark rings under her eyes.

Her hands were clenched. In her rage, and with the ravages that a sleepless, tortured night had made on her beauty she looked more like a fury than a woman.

"Get down there and open the door!" ordered one of the officers, curtly.

"Why?" asked Ben.

"We want you."

"I'm afraid that isn't reason enough," mocked the boy.

"Have you a warrant for me? If you have, I'll trouble you to break the door in. If you haven't a warrant, then you know well enough the risk you run in breaking down the door."

"We can arrest you on suspicion, without a warrant," announced the deputy sheriff.

"What have you done with my husband?" screamed Jessica, as the officers paused, baffled.

"Didn't know you had one, ma'am," Ben replied, with mock politeness.

"He would have been my husband in two minutes more," shrilled Jessica.

"Come, come," broke in Deputy Davis. "Open this door."

"It doesn't suit me to just now," yawned Ben.

"If you had a warrant, you could break that door in," cried Jessica, eagerly.

"Yes, ma'am," nodded Davis.

"Couldn't I swear out a warrant before the justice?" pressed the girl.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then come! At least, one of you stay here and the other come with me while I swear out that warrant!" cried the girl, tremulously.

"And, while you go with the young lady, officer," called down Ben, from his perch at the transom, "you might just as well tell her that, if she swears out a warrant, and then can't prove what she charges in it, she'll be liable to imprisonment herself for false arrest."

"Is that true?" hissed Jessica, turning to Davis.

"Yes, ma'am," replied the deputy.

Jessica's overwrought nerves could bear no more.

Breaking into a fit of weeping, she fled down the corridor, followed by Davis, while the other deputy remained on guard before the door.

Closing the transom, Ben sprang lightly to the floor, turned and surveyed his smiling face in a mirror, and then seated himself in a chair, with a book he found, to kill time.

At noon he lunched on the provisions he had brought with him.

Then he killed more time until the middle of the afternoon.

At last there came a very sharp knock at the door.

"Who's there?" called Ben.

"Mr. Arthur Grant."

"Just wait there a minute, please, until I have a look at you."

From the transom Ben surveyed the man who stood before the door.

"Yes, you're Mr. Grant all right," announced the boy. "Wait a second, and I'll let you in."

Dropping to the floor, he unlocked the door to his impatient caller.

In right after Mr. Grant the two deputy sheriffs pushed their way.

"Now, I guess we've got you, young man," declared Deputy Davis.

"Yes; if you really want me," smiled Ben. "But this gentleman is Mr. Grant, and he is the guardian of Den Brooks, who won't be of age for a few months yet. So I guess it would be as well to wait until Mr. Grant and I have had a talk before you go any further."

"And I want that talk quick!" blazed Mr. Grant. "Your very remarkable telegram, Freeman, declared that you had forcibly abducted my ward in order to save him from a life-long mistake."

"Gentlemen," said Ben, turning to the deputies, "you may take the key, if you wish, as a guarantee that I won't lock the door again. But I really want a few minutes' private talk with Mr. Grant."

"I guess there can be no harm in that," nodded Grant, turning to the deputies.

He was a fine-looking, elderly man, this guardian of the boy who had lived on Easy Street in Fool's Paradise.

Ben, left to himself, was by no means at a loss for words. He went rapidly through his story, during the telling of which Mr. Grant's look of amazement gradually deepened. But at length that gentleman jumped up with outstretched hand.

"Freeman, you're the cleanest-cut, clearest-headed youngster I've ever met. You're the right friend for my dear lad. You've no notion, Freeman, how I love that boy, fool though he may be in some respects. But you'll be the making of him, if you'll stick to him. And I'll see that you don't lose by it."

"I guess we can ask the deputies in now?" smiled Ben.

"By all means, my dear fellow."

Ben stepped to the door and opened it. Jessica stood there, too, restrained by the deputies from entering the room.

"Come in, gentlemen," invited Ben, hospitably, "and let the lady come in, too, if she wishes."

Jessica entered, with the scornful look of a tragedy queen. But Mr. Arthur Grant left no room for guessing. He took the floor instantly, and held it.

"Officers," announced Mr. Grant, "Den Brooks is not of age. I am his legal guardian. These are facts that can be easily proved. As his guardian, I fully, wholly and unreservedly approve of the acts of Mr. Benjamin Freeman. You will realize, therefore, that no charge of abduction, or other charge, will hold against Mr. Freeman."

"But have I no rights?" broke in Jessica.

"Who are you, madam?" asked Mr. Grant, mildly, as he looked at her.

"I was standing before a justice to be married to your ward when this outrage occurred," she cried, tensely.

"While a minor may marry without the consent of his guardian or parent," responded Mr. Grant, "he cannot marry after the parent or guardian expressly forbids the marriage. And I do forbid the marriage!"

"Why?" demanded Jessica, looking at the old man with flaming eyes.

Mr. Grant hesitated. Plainly it did not come easy to him to utter words that should hurt a woman's feelings.

"I—I think it enough to say," he responded, finally, and in a very mild voice, "that, when a young woman is ready and willing, even eager, to marry a young man who is at the time tipsy, then the young man, at least, is not making a wise choice. I am very sorry to say it, madam, but, since my ward will not be able to marry you against my orders during the next few months, I now notify you, in the presence of these witnesses, that I forbid the marriage!"

Jessica's face had grown paler and paler as she listened to the mild but stinging words, and allowed Deputy Davis to lead her away and he turned her over to her aunt, whom they met in the corridor.

"And now for that poor, dear lad!" cried Mr. Grant.

Smiling as the other deputy left the room, Ben turned and rang. To the servant who answered he gave directions to call a carriage.

He and Mr. Grant drove over the route of the night before.

Stopping at the same point, they walked on to the house. At Ben's summons Mr. Jim Cosby opened the door.

"How is the young man?" whispered Ben.

"Raging," replied Mr. Cosby, calmly, as he took his pipe from between his teeth. "He has been daring me to set his hands and feet free so as he can thrash me the way he says I deserve."

"It's the first time, sir, that Den has showed grit enough to really want to fight—and fight a bigger fellow, at that. If you'll let me have my way, we'll encourage him, for after that fight is through, if it's a game one, the young man's grit will be established, and it'll grow after that."

"I believe you're right!" murmured Mr. Grant.

So our hero ordered Jim:

"Get down in the cellar, set him free, and give him a good fight. Don't hammer the life out of him. But make him put up a good game fight for a few rounds, and see that he gets enough punishment to make a man out of him. Mr. Grant will pay you well, if you do the job just right."

Grinning, the ex-tramp stepped into the house. There were soon sounds of a lively fight in the cellar underneath. Five minutes of lively fighting went on down in the cellar.

Then the trap shot suddenly open, and Den Brooks came up, smiling, triumphant.

But he caught sight of Ben's smiling face, and made a dash for him.

"You hound!" gritted Den. "I'll do for you, too, now!"

They clinched, but in a twinkling Ben had him down and helpless.

"Stop this nonsense, Den—stop it, I tell you!" roared Mr. Grant.

Then toward the trap the old man stepped, calling down: "How are you, Cosby?"

"Coming around, sir, thank you," came the wheezy answer. "The kid knocked me out. But I'm getting my breath, sir."

Then, once more that day, Mr. Arthur Grant took the floor.

In a short time he had made Den realize how fully Ben was his friend.

"I'll step out of Fool's Paradise now, then," grinned Den, sheepishly. "Will you take my hand, Ben?"

"Of course I will, old chap," cried Ben, delightedly.

"And Ben Freeman will stick to you, after this, if I can offer him enough financial inducement," cried Mr. Grant.

Den's grit never faltered after that sudden coming into manhood.

He and Ben, just a little older, both of them, are still fast friends.

Ben is also Nance Ferguson's husband, by the way.

Den, wholly cured of his brief infatuation for Jessica Holland, also forgot his love for Nance when he met her chum, Mildred Hoyle.

So Den is married, too, and safely at last.

It was Mr. Arthur Grant who provided Ben with a comfortable little fortune that enabled him to marry comfortably.

Nance, too, received a substantial amount of her own as a wedding gift.

Herr Knapp didn't die. But his softening brain carried him to an insane asylum.

Ferd Laylor won his desire to become Jessica's husband.

But, in trying to satisfy her many wants, he was led to embezzle another's money.

He is now in prison, while Jessica, aged early, and her beauty gone, awaits his release.

Jim Cosby? He's foreman, now, on Arthur Grant's place, where the two couples he's most interested in spend much of their time.

Ben's mother and Nance's learned father are members of that same home party.

THE END.

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